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MY DEVON YEAR
UP ALONG AND DOWN ALONG



THE PORTREEVE

BY

EDEN PHILLPOTTS

AUTHOR OF "THE SECRET WOMAN," "THE RIVER," ETC.

23,572

WITH A FRONTISPIECE BY A. B. COLLIER

SECOND EDITION

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Second Edition . . . *February 1906*

CONTENTS

BOOK I

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. A HAPPY MAN	3
II. THE CENOTAPHS	8
III. A SUPPER PARTY	17
IV. THE ISLAND OF ROCKS	25
V. PRIMROSE HORN	31
VI. LINTS TOR	41
VII. THE DRIFT	52
VIII. ADVICE	63
IX. 'ASK PIERCE'	69
X. THE COMFORTER	77
XI. TWO LETTERS	85
XII. ABEL'S COURAGE IS REVIVED	91
XIII. DEATH OF 'BROWN BOY'	98
XIV. YES TOR	107
XV. THE WALK FROM CHURCH	114

BOOK II

I. COMBE CLIFFS	125
II. LUCK FOR SLANNING	133
III. THE DINNER HOUR	141
IV. A GOOD DAY'S WORK	147
V. THE MEETING OF THREE	156
VI. THE CHRISTENING PARTY	162
VII. A MESSAGE	169
VIII. ONE TRAVELLER RETURNS	175

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
IX. LIGHT ON A PROBLEM	182
X. BLACK TOR COPSE	190
XI. BREAKING THE NEWS	200
XII. 'JOY GO WITH YOU, AND TWOPENCE'	210

BOOK III

I. THE CUT DIRECT	217
II. A LARGER LIFE	225
III. THE BLUE ROSETTE	231
IV. THE MEETING	239
V. PATRIOTISM	248
VI. GOOD AND BAD	258
VII. A SALE OF STOCK	268
VIII. BREAKING THE NEWS	275
IX. ORLANDO IS DISLOYAL	283
X. AT 'SLANNING'S'	291
XI. THE SILENT PLACES	301
XII. FLIGHT OF TIME	309
XIII. BACK TO BRIDGETSTOWE	320
XIV. CLOUDS	327
XV. DICKY VISITS ORLANDO	336
XVI. THE ELECTION	346
XVII. 'IN AT THE DEATH'	354
XVIII. A GOOD YEAR'S WORK	362

BOOK I

THE PORTREEVE

CHAPTER I

A HAPPY MAN

DEVON spread her glory to the sun, and, in vesture of high summer, shone like an opal on earth's buxom breast. The time was between the harvests. Pale meadows, whence the hay had vanished, spread for many a mile over hill and valley; ricks rose silvery and sweet of savour in the hot hazes; corn was kerring, and each glowing hour lessened the green of it and added to the gold. Beneath Dartmoor's northern wing, removed from the central wilderness by some miles of forest, fallow and fertile land, a little church-town sunned itself and basked under the rare weather. Only in corners unseen sorrow lurked and suffering hid its head; content was at doors and windows; the hollow smiled and chimed with the music of children. Indeed, maternity seemed the first business of this nest. Here ripe matrons were suckling the race to come, and many a young wife budded to motherhood. They congregated where a rivulet, laden with sweet water from the Moor, babbled at their cottage doors, brought down the first dawn-light to earth, sparkled at noon, and reflected the evening star. A bridge spanned the water, and beside it sank steps to stream-side. Here the folk, resting red pitchers, held their talk of home politics and good and evil fortune; here joy leapt in laughter along; and here tears sometimes fell unseen and flowed away to the sea.

At this morning hour, women moved among the cottages and stood in the shade of trees. The burden and heat of the day was being borne upon the land, and in the shop, and on the scafold. Men were shining at the forge; men were panting

by the river. There fleeces fell and shorn sheep bleated and galloped snow-white on the shorn meadows. Men built with brick and stone, where unlovely dwellings rose raw about the confines of the hamlet. Beneath, the carpenter's plane whistled and the shavings curled sweet and knee-deep at his bench; above, the mason's trowel clinked on the brick and hissed into the wet mortar. The daily battle waxed under the sun's fire; but the camp was left to women and children. Infants and kittens played and purred about the hatches of the cottages; ancient, wintry men, bent this way and that by the storm of years, crept and buzzed together by the bridge; droned of the old time, and waited, like autumn flies, for the frost to end them.

Small gardens spread before the cots of Bridgetstowe, and its roofs were of weathered slate. The dwellings extended in rows slantwise, and woodstacks, barns and trees broke up the lines of them. Iron-blue roads dropped into the village from north and west and south. In the central spaces extended a sort of rialto, or resort, before the door of the "Royal Oak"; and over against this rallying-point, separated by a low wall from the stir and tumult of existence, there lay the sleeping-places of the dead. The men and women of Bridgetstowe plunge into life's very heart within twenty yards of the dust that bore them. They make love and history upon the confines of their own graves. The churchyard lies, like a green jewel, in shining setting of sun-baked house-roofs; and tower and trees spring together therefrom. But their dead do not dominate those who dwell here, and the folk take no thought for these camps and lodges of the silent people. Empty pewters and loud laughter ring at the inn door on one side of the boundaries; upon the other, church bells chime, and jackdaws make music. There is no discord, for all are sounds proper to Bridgetstowe's life; and not one disturbs the green dormitory in the midst.

Beside the road that enters this village from the neighbouring market-town of Okehampton, a dark-browed cottage shall still be seen. Its strip of garden on this summer day was aflame with crimson phloxes, and along with them strong clumps of Michaelmas daisies were preparing future bloom. Over the wicket gate a mountain rowan had been trained upon an arch, like a wild thing tamed and taught to do a stupid trick. Already its fruit reddened to scarlet.

Before the door of this little house there stood a man. No dewy grave nor dry skeleton threw any shadow on his life's feast, for he was, at once, the serenest and loneliest spirit in his native village. But the days of his solitude were numbered, and for that reason joy filled him until, among many other cheerful hearts, his was the gladdest. Because, where happy mothers moved and old folk sat in the sun, contentment spread unconsciously and the fair weather and good harvest diffused an objective and general spirit and scent of hope; but in the case of this man his ecstasy was personal: he had reached the threshold of his fortune, and the future promised nothing but prosperity. He was successful; he was healthy; a woman he dearly loved had just promised to marry him; and this climax accrued from his own energy, resource and good sense.

Dodd Wolferstan was a florid, quick-eyed, quick-tempered, resolute spirit of one-and-thirty. His straw-coloured hair sat smooth and neat to his head; his small moustache, which in no way concealed a pleasant mouth, had the hue of pale amber. A demeanour that almost deserved to be called distinguished marked him. A fresh, cleanly and manly air sat upon him. His speech was brisk; the glance of his grey eyes was keen without boldness, and he possessed a natural delicacy of mind that resulted in good manners. The son of peasants and orphaned at early youth, he had risen from the atmosphere of a workhouse to his present position. Some element of inherited or inherent talent so favoured him, that his equals were never jealous, and his superiors found themselves attracted by his just conduct, his religious conviction and his unfailing courtesy. The mainspring of the man was ambition; and any touch of genius that he might be said to possess, appeared in the tact with which he kept out of sight a trait so apt to be unpleasant. Only one human being had ever heard him brag; and she was the woman who meant to marry him. To her his high resolves seemed reasonable. Such a future as he planned might fairly be predicted from his past—so Ilet Yelland thought. She believed that every hair of his sleek head had virtue in it, and marvelled that he set his aims so low, not that he pitched them so high. Sometimes he chid her zeal on his account, yet loved her the better for it.

The present position of the man involved an immense deal of hard work, for he combined a variety of small trades and crafts

in his person. When he was twenty-three he had been the best thatcher in North Devon, and, at twenty-five, he won half a dozen first prizes for ploughing. From these successes he rose to a bailiff's place on a large grazing farm and learnt from his master, one Alexander Horn, as much as that skilled cattle-breeder could teach him. At Bowden Farm he worked for five years, made money for the owner, and saved some for himself. Then he took three acres of ground at Bridgetstowe and became a successful market gardener on a small scale. A lofty brick wall, facing south, and some fine fruit trees, in pride of bearing, had served to win him local fame with pears and apples. He was a scientific bee-keeper and lectured for the Association. He took photographs, and his pictures of the wilder regions of the Moor won a small sale among visitors during summer time in the border towns. He was Vicar's churchwarden and had tried without success for a seat on the parish council. But office he held, and to him belonged the dignity of a post in which the village took large pride. Wolferstan was Portreeve of Bridgetstowe—a title thought to lend lustre to the hamlet, albeit the real duties proper to that position had long been abstracted and bestowed elsewhere.

In Saxon times this officer was reeve of market towns and steward of free men. He stood for the community, controlled transactions of sale or barter, and represented power. Not the King, not the State, not the lord of the borough elected him. He obtained his authority from his equals. He was "the reeve or steward of his town's rights and liberties for his term of office on behalf of his fellow citizens."* The significance of this functionary and his old powers were gradually reduced. The lords of boroughs began to influence elections, so that the later portreeves sank to mere creatures and represented other interests than those of the free-holding and rate-paying communities. To-day the free men levy rates no more: it is the people's part, and machinery of guardians and vestries have swept the portreeve into oblivion. He remains a picturesque but futile figure, and Dodd Wolferstan's work in this capacity consisted of nominal duties for discharge of which other persons were really responsible. The overseership of the parish commons, however, in truth devolved upon him, and since that labour put him on horseback and took him for

* See an admirable paper by Mr. P. F. S. Amery, the antiquary. "Transactions of Devonshire Association," 1889.

many a gallop along the fringes of the Moor, he delighted in it. As a local man he enjoyed Venville rights and privileges, and himself pastured at profit a few sheep and ponies upon the waste.

He was worth rather more than a hundred and fifty pounds a year, and knew that his income steadily increased. Life had left little leisure for sentiment, but at this moment love came uppermost with him, while his master-passion burnt with banked fires beneath. Ambition to achieve ruled his days. Not seldom he mingled piety and aspiration when he visited the church to pray and to regard certain cenotaphs therein. His parents slept without and he had set up a memorial to them with the first ten pounds that he saved ; but other and greater Wolferstans slumbered in the vaults beneath St. Bridget's fane. Openly to claim relationship at present had been foolish ; though his soul asserted it in secret ; and he looked forward to a time when this pretension should be recognized and established.

To-day Dodd Wolferstan made holiday. He looked up and down the road, slapped his neat brown gaiters with a cane, and adjusted his hard hat once or twice, for it was new and pinched his head a trifle above the ears. His brown tweed suit was also new, and he wore a linen shirt. As he stood at his cottage door, he seemed outwardly superior to that environment. It was his custom to observe the clothes of his betters and imitate them—not with vulgar closeness, but at modest distance. His manners he modelled after the same method. Thus he had a sort of fashion and style of his own—above his station, yet not so much above it as to beget either ridicule or jealousy.

Ilet Yelland was coming to spend the day with her sweetheart, and he looked at his watch impatiently. But an hour had yet to elapse before she would arrive ; so he started to Sourton village that he might meet her on the road.

CHAPTER II

THE CENOTAPHS

THROUGH deep lanes that wind between Sourton hamlet under Dartmoor and the village of Bridgetstowe, the woman, Ilet Yelland, proceeded to her lover. She walked slowly on the shady side of the way, and fanned herself with her handkerchief, so that she might be cool for his kiss. Ilet was twenty-three and looked rather more than her age. She was tall and slightly built. Her face was dark, but healthy and handsome. Her expression indicated character and power of feeling; her mouth was steadfast yet full and round of lip; and her brown eyes were lighted from the heart rather than the mind. Left alone in the world, she had come to live with an aunt at Sourton, and to make the acquaintance of other relatives not known to her before.

One of these now walked beside her, and they might have been judged brother and sister; but Abel Pierce was Ilet's cousin. He dwelt with his widowed mother in a lonely cottage on Dartmoor and lived by varied labours—now at oak-rinding in the spring woods, now upon the railway hard by, and now upon the land.

The young man's face was gloomy and love smouldered in his sleepy, sulky eyes as he stared down at his cousin. But she looked forward and, while in her mind there lurked some regret for his grief, her pretty mouth was sunny with smilets and her heart beat for another.

Abel Pierce stood six feet tall and was a thin but powerful and wiry man of six-and-twenty years old. His hair was black and he wore a beard cut to his chin. On his shoulder hung a frail, which contained bread and meat and a tin can of tea. He was going to join a break-down gang, where a railway-truck

had left the rails and blocked the permanent way near Bridgestowe station ; and he had met his cousin by accident.

"What do 'e see in Wolferstan beyond the prosperity of the man?" he asked suddenly.

His voice was a deep and harsh bass, and hers, by contrast, seemed more than common melodious as she answered.

"Prosperity's nought. 'Tisn't part of love. I love him because I've got to. I love him for loving me."

"If that was all ! Don't I love you ? But I'm a day labourer. He's a great man—though he was at the plough-tail not so long ago."

"You don't choose to understand, Abel. 'Tisn't that I'm only flattered the likes of him should care for me. How can I explain? You know what it is to love."

"Yes, by God !"

"Abel dear," she said, "an' I love you too. You're a good chap ; an' a good son ; an' happy will be the she that's your wife, come you take one."

"Never ! There was only you for me—ay, an' only me for you till master Dodd came along, wi' his flower in his button-hole, an' rosy cheeks, an' yellow leggings. Don't say 'no.' Be love blind? Never ; 'tis eyes all over. You was getting to love me fast. I *know* it. By a tender token here an' there—by your eyelids—an' by them lips, cuddling one another till your mouth was like a strawberry ; by this and that and t'other sign that set me in a tremble to keep my arms from going round you ! Why didn't I put 'em round you afore he came—fool that I was !"

"I wish you wouldn't think such things."

"I think what I know. An' my mother knowed. Often—often have I axed her, after us had been to see you, or you an' Aunt Susie had comed to drink tea with her—often have I said, 'What dost think, mother?' An' she have screwed up her little eyes, an' smiled down deep in her head, an' the smile of her have wriggled up through all the wrinkles to the surface, like a fish comes up from deep water to breathe. Then she have peeped at me in her dry, old, withered way an' said, 'Ilet's for 'e—I know the signs !'"

"Not after I met Mr. Wolferstan—not after that."

"~~Mist~~ Wolferstan ! 'Tis all summed up there !"

She shook her head.

"You won't understand."

"No, I'm dull—a regular dolt. You can't tumble down the life I had built up, just at the name of the Portreeve of Bridgestowe. But tell me this. Ban't much to ax. Cold comfort, yet a consolement like. If he'd never come along——?"

She thought before answering the trite question. Then a brisk figure appeared at a bend of the lane ahead, and Wolferstan's stick was waved in the air.

"You ax that, dear Abel? If you'd listened awhile back, you'd have heard me say that I do love you—now, this minute—you an' your mother too—ever since I was orphaned and came to join Aunt Susie at Sourton. As to how it might have fallen—'tis an idle question. He's here—he's my all, my first hope and thought. He's the sun to me to guide my going 'twixt now and the end. His hopes and fears and good and evil be mine for evermore. All—all I'll do for him that a faithful woman can do for man. Nothing——"

"Shut your mouth!" he said roughly. "D'you think I don't know what I've lost, that you rub it in like this? Don't you know 'tis gall and hell to me to hear you? Here's my way. Don't fear me. I'll be out o' earshot. I've heard enough—an' this I've heard: you can love me too. He's stolen you from me, an', afore the God he makes such a fuss about, he shall pay for it!"

The love-stricken Pierce climbed over a stile as Dodd approached.

"Good morning!" shouted the Portreeve, but Abel took no notice and went on his way.

"Sorry," said Wolferstan as he kissed his sweetheart. "I know about it. 'Tis enough to make the world look black for him. Maybe a good few more are in the same fix. I can't believe my luck even yet, Ilet."

"I hope you'll always call it luck, Dodd."

"No," he answered, "'twas a wrong word and dropped from me. You'm the gift of Heaven. I can't tell 'e half of the thoughts that wake in me of a night over you—after the day's work's done. Thoughts beyond my power of words to handle. And the prayers I pray get out of hand also. Too big for words they are. 'Tis a queer thing, yet helpful. Prayer rolls out so

wordless as the river in flood, or the organs in church when service is done."

"Maybe God puts the words to it."

"He do, without a doubt."

"I be very thankful for you, dear Dodd. I wish I was better worth. But I'll wear."

"Love's nought that won't, I reckon. I axed myself last night—to try myself—what I'd do if I had to choose between being lord of the manor and husband of Ilet Yelland."

"Ah! How long did it take 'e to answer?"

"That's the grand wonder—showing what love of woman be. I didn't answer. The feeling in me was just pure anger that the question had come up! I could have kicked myself for the thought. If I might be King of England—what's that against you? Better have a queen for a wife than be a king yourself—eh?"

"I'll never drag you down, my dear. I ban't very clever, worse luck, but 'tis wonderful what reading books can do, an' the power over spelling an' such like. Without boastfulness, I've one useful thing about me: an' that's a power of silence. Nought becomes an ignorant woman better. I'll never shame 'e in public, Dodd."

"Like your greatness to think of such things. Shame me! Let my part be to be worthy of you, Ilet. I may have come from good stock away back, an' right well I know I did; an' I'll live to show the world so; but that's good fortune—not to my own credit. An' you—you are yourself. That's all I care about. An' high as I may go, you'll go higher. I heard my pal, Dicky Barkell, say a thing a bit ago that stuck in my mind. He said good women was always better than the best men, because they don't know so many ways of being bad. A man can't be so good as a woman can."

"Richard Barkell's a fool behind all his chatter. I hate a man as talks over your head. Ban't civil."

"Dick's all right. But I'm going to talk about Dodd Wolferstan to-day an' no other man. I've planned to walk down Lydford Gorge and show 'e Kit's Steps. But first there's dinner spread at the 'Royal Oak.' And before that, I'm going to take you in the church to see they monuments."

"'Tis ~~all~~ one to me, so I'm alongside you," she said.

THE PORTREEVE

The church was approached through a lofty gateway and by an avenue of lime trees and many tombs. Near the porch a sexton's tools stood and a grave yawned.

"Old Johns will lie there to-morrow," said the Portreeve. "We shall miss him and his opinions. He remembered the ancient times very well. He was one of them old-fashioned men, who knew what work meant."

They entered St. Bridget's and Dodd marched up the left transept and pointed to an urn in bas-relief above a little tablet.

"That's to my parents," he said. "I had it put up some time ago. They died when I was a boy, ten years old, and I was brought up by other people. Mother and father lie in the churchyard amongst the unknown graves. But this is a lasting mark."

She nodded and read the inscription :—

To the memory of Jonathan Dodd Wolferstan of this parish, who departed this life on the 20th of February 1880. Aged 54 years.

Also to Jemima Wolferstan, his wife, who died on the 12th of February 1881. Aged 54 years.

"He first deceased. She for a little tried
To live without him, liked it not and died."

This monument to the memory of his loved parents was erected by their son, Dodd Wolferstan.

"I got the rhyme off an old tomb. It just suited 'em," the man explained. "When father died, me an' mother had to go into the union workhouse, because she was a very weakly woman and never got over bringing me into the world in her forty-fourth year. So they died within twelve months of each other. Now I want you to look at this famous stone to the memory of Lady Honor Wolferstan. It's nearly two hundred and fifty year old. Sexton and Mrs. Ball, the butt-woman, often laugh when they see me reading it over. Let 'em laugh! Time will show."

He took Het to a memorial that stood within the sanctuary upon the left side of the holy table. Above it shone a gilded coat of arms with the many quarterings of the Wolferstan house.

Dodd read the record aloud ; and he spoke in a subdued voice, because other persons were inspecting the church :—

To the pious memory of Lady Honor Wolferstan, who departed this life the 17th day of December 1663.

“ Eight fruitful branches still are springing sound
Though here the root lies dead within the ground.
Two husbands in their tombs divided lie
Who both did in the bed of Honor die.
But here the King of Terrors, oh unjust,
At last hath lay'd their Honor in the dust
Till that which here is in dishonour sown
Be raised in Honour to a glorious Throne.”

“ Now I hold 'tis from that great lady I spring,” continued the Portreeve. “ ‘ Eight fruitful branches ’—mark that. She had four sons and two daughters by her second husband, and three of those four sons married and got families. 'Tis my pastime to trace it out, though in honesty I can't say as the links meet yet. My grandfather was a humble man.”

“ What does it matter so long as you are you ? ”

“ It matters a great deal. When I've got a bit of money to spend, I'm going to do more about it. Money's the thing.”

“ 'Tis the last matter I'd spend on,” she said.

“ 'Tis the first that I shall,” he answered calmly. “ You haven't thought about it. When you have, you'll feel different. Blood's a grand idea. It may have streamed down through a few common women here and there ; but that don't signify. Nought stamps it out of a man wholly. The Courtenay nose has lasted for centuries, I'm told. Wolferstans have done good things too. 'Tis a name with a ring to it, in my opinion.”

“ 'Twill ring true enough as long as you bear it.”

“ Please God. But let me only get the weight of the great behind my back, and see how 'twill push me forward ! ”

“ I wonder, with your high notions, you didn't look elsewhere for a wife.”

“ Why ? A female can't raise a man. 'Tis him lifts her up—according to the length and breadth of his name. I'm a Wolferstan. Where's better ? ”

“ The Horns where you used to work to Bowden be an ancient house, my aunt tells me.”

He nodded.

"True; an' they've helped to make history in their way. 'Twas actually on their land that there fell heavy fighting in the wars, when King Charles the First and Oliver Cromwell were at death grips. By night in a gale of wind they fought. Miss Primrose knowed all about it, for her forbears were there and helped the king's men. It shows how time topples things. Now Farmer Horn's no better than a red radical, and his daughter don't take a pin of pride in her havage."

"Did you use to see much of her when you was bailiff there?"

They moved away from the Wolferstan monument as other visitors approached it, led by Mrs. Ball. Then Dodd answered Het's question.

"Yes. I saw a lot of her. She was a great study in womanhood to me, always."

"She's lovely—I know that much."

"Not a doubt of it; an' wonderful brave for a woman. Good blood there, I'll warrant! I always felt that with her, for all her own contempt of it. A strong-minded sort of girl—and more than kind to me. 'Twas she helped me not a little to gather knowledge of bygone Wolferstans."

"Belike you was fond of her?"

"D'you mind what you told me you felt for Abel Pierce—your cousin? An easy sort of regard as might have borne forcing into ripeness if nothing else had happened. That was your frank word."

"A thought too frank, perhaps," she said.

"Not so. I never felt vexed about it. 'Twas pure honesty in you to admit it. An' I'll be as honest as you. That's how I felt to her—to say it in all humbleness. Of course she weren't interested in me. Why should she have been? We're very good friends now. I'm going there to eat my dinner on Sunday. It hasn't been proved I'm her equal; but she knows it can be proved."

Het's eyes clouded, but her tongue gave praise.

"A lovely thing to see on horseback."

"She is. She lives for 'em in her queer way—hosses, I mean. They are her first friends. Yet she's not what the quality call a 'horsy woman.' Still, 'tis a pleasure for any sportsman to see her mounted."

"I could a'most find it in me to hate her for knowing you so many years afore I did. The more I think, the more the wonder grows how you can love as low as me, Dodd."

"Don't say silly things like that; and don't think them. You're as much above me, as I am above poor old Crocker, who touched his hat to me as we came down the hill. Yet there have been Crockers that hob-nobbed with dukes. Time do tumble families over and over so. Men are like sand in a spring—churned up one minute to go down the next."

"To think of chaps touching their hats to you!"

"Well, first time one did it, I went home and pondered for an hour. 'Twas a landmark in life, for you can separate men roughly by them as pull their hair and them as don't."

"Don't you touch yours to your betters, my dear?"

"Not anyhow, like I did. There's grades in that business. For instance, where I did touch my hat to ladies—now I take it off. But, mark you, not like their own men take 'em off; but with a difference and a bit of a bow. Their own men bow from the neck. I bow from the small of the back. When I'm higher up, I shall bow from the neck too."

"To think of such niceness! The difficulty——"

"It sounds more difficult than it is," he told her. "There are things that seem a lot to tell about, but are nothing to do. They come like nature. I salute men just with the amount of civility that's due to 'em. To parson I always cap and always shall—to the holy calling as well as to the man. Also, of course, to the lord of the manor. My father always touched his hat to a pair of horses, whether he knowed the parties or not. 'Twas a simple rule and no harm done to his self-respect—seeing he was but a hedge-tacker."

"You'll never be ashamed of his memory, however?"

"Not I. He was an honest man in all things. I'm shamed of nothing belonging to me. I'd speak of all—except—well, to be clear, there's no need to dwell upon them early days in the workhouse. I hate the word. I got out of it and began earning my own living at thirteen."

She was leaving the church when he stopped her.

"Wait till those people go, then just kneel down beside me, Ilet—just a minute. I want to see you there. Us have been tokened ten days—but we haven't knelt close together to thank God."

She put her hand into his where they sat ; then, when left alone, they prayed for a little while.

All fell out as Dodd had planned. The day passed joyfully for them both, and in the dewy dusk, where a churn-owl made his harsh music and dor-beetles set night throbbing, the Portreeve drove his love home again to Sourton.

CHAPTER III

A SUPPER PARTY

ABEL PIERCE and his mother dwelt in a cottage beside West Okement, where that river winds beneath the northern ramparts of Dartmoor. A rivulet called Fishcombe Head Water here joins the parent stream, and at the junction stood Pierce's most lonely home under Homerton Hill. Enormous undulations of the land billowed down to the valley and then rolled up again on the other side. They merged their foothills at this snug and sheltered dingle and hemmed in silence, save for the endless music of the river. No storm shook this spot; no tempest broke here until itself was broken on the granite wilderness above. The Moor might be swept by hurricanes, stabbed by lightning, flogged by hail, but the sequestered coomb continued at peace, and the story of the upland chaos only came in the roar of the river. Cross eddies of the south-east wind raving down by Fishcombe Head Water did indeed invade the cottage at times and freeze the milk in the larder; then Henny Pierce, Abel's mother, would desert her kitchen and light her parlour fire until the wind changed.

Behind the house a deep dingle sloped upward between the hills of Homerton and Longstone to the boggy apron of Black Tor; and through its midst Fishcombe Head Water tumbled and clattered by granite and heather, ferns and grasses, golden rod and the purple buttons of the devil's-bit scabious. A great holly tree marked its winding way, and not far from the cottage was one deep pool into which glittering mosses dripped crystal. Around about primroses and the golden saxifrage glimmered in springtime; and here, on Sunday mornings, Abel Pierce was wont to bathe and wash the stain of six days' labour from his body.

Westerly of the cot sprang up South Down—a mighty hill

where the seasons worked their patterns as on a loom. Tangled brakes of hawthorn and furze climbed upward to the fringe of forests, and, between them, naked clitters of blue stone shone or sulked according to the sky. In June the may lighted this expanse and the greater gorse spread like a running fire; then, with passing of spring, the hawthorn faded through phases of delicate pink, the gorse perished, and the highest colour-song was on the blue-grey shale slopes which thrust themselves in scattered debris through the grassy integument of the down. These stones faced the east, so that morning touched them as the sun heaved above Yes Tor and woke their responsive neutral tints to reflection of rose or silver on fair mornings, or the leaden grey of rain when day broke darkly.

Then waxed the heath and later gorse, and anon russet harmonies of brake-fern and autumn leaves burnt along the hill, with flash of falling foliage and crimson and scarlet and purple fruits from the whitethorn and the briony, the blackthorn and the briar. Lastly, winter drowned all with torrents of rushing water, or dwarfed the hugeness of the place in snow. Then vanished its deep concavities and curves, delicate hillocks and dimples, slopes and steeps, in one far-flung coverlet of whiteness.

Hither returned Abel after a heavy day of work; and twice he looked at his watch as he tramped back over Corn Ridge; because it happened that on this evening guests were expected at Fishcombe Cot, and Pierce desired not to be late for so unusual an occasion.

Old Abner Barkell and his son, Richard, had already arrived when their host returned. They dwelt a mile distant in Meldon valley near the railway bridge. Mr. Barkell's labours had ceased, and he passed through the latter phases of his existence under the shadow of the mighty steel structure he had assisted to build. It dominated his life, and that fragment of the world's energy represented by his working days, was now to some extent embalmed amid the numberless rivets of Meldon Viaduct. He had laboured at its construction and, since its completion, had been employed to assist in repairing the giant when need arose. He knew the bridge as a watchmaker knows a watch or an engineer his engine. It was his life, as art is the life of an artist, as the oak is the life of her proper hamadryad. Abner's son was also employed by the South Western Railway, and pur-

sued his business of signalman in a box beyond the viaduct, where the railroad splits and a branch winds north-west to Cornwall.

In regarding the ancient Barkell, one was conscious rather of a bald neck than head. A small, round-eyed face peered forward on its elongated throat, like a withered flower upon its stalk. He was red and wrinkled, cheerful and hopeful. He could be merry on every subject but that of the viaduct. When speaking of this, his voice sank, as a voice sinks if religion is the matter. He was nearly bald; his eyes watered and lacked lashes or brows, but merriment as well as rheum shone about them. His round nose was veined with purple, and he had no hair upon his face, save for one wart, under his right ear, from which depended a silver thread or two. His voice was weak but echoed laughter. Abner's son appeared to be a youthful copy of himself. Richard had the same long neck and small, amiable countenance. His hair was thin and of a nondescript brown. His forehead was better developed than his parent's, and he possessed more intelligence. Yet to him also, viewed from an outer standpoint, life was chiefly matter for amusement. He was still young; he had never plunged into the art of living seriously, and never intended to do so. Life to the young and old becomes a circumstance without overmuch detail. Ignorance and forgetfulness may bring the spectator to a like conclusion concerning it. Only in the midst of the fight much material for real gravity offers. To Abner nothing mattered now but the welfare of Meldon Viaduct; to his son nothing mattered at all. He was no fool, yet often seemed so to his neighbours, owing to an accident of character. The younger Barkell had no ambition, and his friends—Dodd Wolferstan among the number—presented to him the curious spectacle of much trouble being taken upon matters not worthy of trouble. His philosophic attitude was unconscious but constitutional. It tended to utmost simplification of life, and its selfishness did not specially appear, since its obvious obligations were few. He had two elder brothers who were both sailors; and a sister happily married to a small tradesman at Exeter. His widowed father sank to old age without more physical discomfort than rheumatism and the load of seventy years. The signalman's work was child's play to one of his intellect, and gave him leisure for his solitary amusement: that of reading.

Mr. Barkell wore his Sunday black on the occasion of this supper, and Richard, who had come directly from work, displayed the regulation velveteen suit and scarlet necktie of his Railway.

"Here us be!" said Abner, as Pierce entered the kitchen. "'Tis like the goodness of you people to take us, I'm sure. Our kitchen boiler will be mended Monday; then you must come over and peck along with us; though my boy's cooking at best is but a sin and a shame."

Abel went into an outhouse to wash; then he joined the supper party.

Mr. Barkell's nose, veined with the delicacy of a flower-petal, sniffed the close air.

"Irish stew—eh? 'Tis the king of victuals in proper hands. A free use of onions, I see, Henny Pierce—like your big nature. No mean woman can cook well. It calls for a generous spirit—a light hand and a large heart."

Abel turned down the lamp, which was smoking.

All ate heartily, but darkness fed with the master of the feast, and he returned no more than surly grunts and nods to the speeches, jests and questions of his friends. Richard knew the trouble and avoided the theme; but old Abner was ignorant of the matter and now unwittingly touched it. When the stew was finished, Mrs. Pierce rose and cleared the table. Then she set clean plates and went to the oven.

"A pudden too! 'Tis a brave spread, an' I'm sure we thank you kindly," declared Mr. Barkell. "I do wish I could risk another half-pint, but your brew be a thought stronger'n ours. What do 'e think, Dicky? Shall I have a dash at it?"

"Let your bones answer. 'Tis they have to pay your beer-bill," said his son.

"Then fill my glass! I'm off duty to-night, so all's said."

It was a fiction with the veteran that he had duty on the viaduct. He received a small pension from the Company and was permitted to haunt the scene of his former toil. In truth, he possessed no responsibility whatever; but he believed the case otherwise and regarded himself as a sort of prime caretaker of the vast span above Oke gorge.

With his mouth full of currant dumpling, Abner now struck the delicate subject of Ilet Yelland.

"Dash my old wig! what changes one hears tell of! So that bowerly cousin of yours have took up with the Portreeve to Bridgetstowe. A fine couple without a doubt, though us all thought you was the chosen."

Dicky tried to kick his father under the table; but, instead, his heavy boot grazed Pierce's shin. Abel appreciated the situation and smiled grimly.

"Let him talk. Yes—she's took up with Wolferstan. But there's many a slip 'twixt the cup an' the lip."

"She'm a very naughty girl," declared Henny. "As good as tokened to Abel here; then that rosy youth—so trim an' dapper—shakes her out of herself an' darkens her judgment."

Mr. Barkell spoke.

"A coorious fashion of man. To think of his father trimming hedges, an' that dirt low that he'd run messages for a gipsy! An' this chap rising so high in the land."

"He ain't got but one gift; an' that's the gift of getting on," declared Mrs. Pierce in grudging tones. She smarted for her son.

"'Tis like charity," answered Abner, sucking his cheeks. "It covers a multitude. He've the skill to get on the blind side of the bettermost. 'Tis a great accomplishment in him."

"There's safety in smallness, however," said his son, "—safety an' peace."

"No doubt," admitted the elder. "A fly can ride on a raging great bullock's back quite comfortable; but you an' me wouldn't travel far that way. 'Tis no real hardship to creep through the world on bread an' bacon, when you see what trouble overtakes the great."

"All the same, 'tis a feeble thought," answered Abel; "I don't blame the man for aiming at big things. I try even in my small way to get above the work I'm called to; though I don't rise, through being one of the unlucky ones. But I blame him with all my force for coming between me an' her. I'm among friends, and so I say 'twas a damned dirty trick, an' the last word's not spoken yet. I'll marry the woman; an' you'll live to see it."

The signalman regarded Pierce with interest. That a man should thus start forth deliberately to complicate life was passing strange to his mind.

"Don't ask me to help—that's all," he said.

"You! A cold-blooded toad like you! You that looks at your fellow-creatures as if we was horsemanship or a show at a fair! No, I don't want your help, nor any other man's; but I say it here, wi' half a pint of beer in me an' no more, that I'll marry the woman from under his nose—by God I will!"

His mother regarded her son nervously, yet not without admiration.

"That's the sort he is—like his father before him," she said to Abner.

"Yes--I mind the chap very well—a size larger than Abel, weren't he? The joke was that they said he carried you about in his pocket, ma'am."

"Six foot three—an' girth to match it. Always hungry for two men's work."

"Yet Death took him like a fly," murmured the ancient.

"'Twas steam power killed him," she answered proudly. "I mind how they said that nothing less than a traction engine could have done it."

The recollection appeared to comfort Henny. She fetched spirits from the cupboard and some clean tumblers. All three men were now smoking and the little room reeked. Mrs. Pierce put another peat on the fire and went into the wash-house. From here she joined in the conversation while she cleaned the plates.

"All's fair in love, according to the old saying," began Abel with smouldering eyes.

"Ban't a subject as I can throw light upon," confessed the signalman. "Females don't touch me; but you—you was always peeping over the wall at the girls, when we went to national school and their playground was next to ours."

"A oner for women I was too," declared Mr. Barkell complacently; "so be Jack an' Samson, my sailor sons. 'Tis a very common taste in seafaring men. Perhaps 'tis knowing the ease they can escape by water when the ship sails. But Dicky here—he'm different; or if he ban't, then he'm a liar."

"You come along an' don't call me names, my old dear," replied his son. "When I find a woman as tempts me to think of matrimony, I'll put it in the newspaper. But I don't reckon 'twill be very soon."

"Think of your old age, Dicky," shouted Mrs. Pierce from the wash-house.

"That's it," he called back. "My judgment is that widows have a lot the best of it; and bachelor-men be better off still."

"How 'bout the childer to keep 'e out of the workhouse at the end, if you don't happen to have good luck?"

"'Tis the childer take you there so often as not. I'd sooner have an annuity than the best childer as ever waited wi' hungry eyes for me to die an' get out o' the way. I don't mean to be under no obligations to childer. There's nought easier on God's earth than not getting a wife an' family, Mrs. Pierce!"

"Go along with you!" she answered. "You just wait till something in petticoats comes uppermost as'll shake you like a rush in the wind. The female's born that will make you look a fool, Richard Barkell."

"So I tell him," declared Richard's parent; "and for my part, the sooner the better. For, to say truth, I miss a woman about our house cruel, an' all the more after such a supper as this. Dicky's a peart chap, but his cooking—a very cut-throat business, I assure 'e! An', when I hug my belly, he says, 'What's the odds after it's gone down?' Why, 'tis just then that Nature ups and tells you what's the odds! The odds between cooking an' messing. But Dick's got a digestion like a dog, and all's one to him. What don't fill fattens, an' what don't fatten fills, wi' him."

Presently father and son prepared to depart, and Abel accompanied them for half a mile through the roughest part of the road. Then Mr. Barkell released his arm and the labourer, with a short 'good-bye,' took himself and his sombre thoughts back to his mother.

Abner stood a moment in the dewy valley, to fill his pipe and rest awhile before beginning the steep ascent to his home. Round about in the mystery of the summer night giant fragments of machinery rose stark and silent, and high above, among the stars, a wisp of steel spanned the huge gap where Oke left Dartmoor and entered the valleys beneath. Meldon Viaduct hung like a spider's web spun of silver above the mists of the gorge. Arms fell from it to the darkness below, and the whole, fraught with night's own magic, possessed a beauty of its own—

a beauty higher than the inherent beauty of perfect adaptation to its purpose. The iron way floated above them, frail and delicate, like some dream-path for spirits. Yet here, transformed by that starry hour to mere staple of light against darkness, there towered a thousand tons of steel supporting a thoroughfare whereon forty thousand human souls sped yearly across the dizzy depths below.

Mr. Barkell regarded the mighty fabric as though his brain had conceived and his hand created it.

"She'll be wanting a coat of paint come Spring," he remarked.

Then, out on to the silvery thread, like a lizard with red eyes, there crept a flat, dark object and slipped across soundless, for the noise of the river prevented any murmur from aloft.

"There goes the ten-thirty," said Abner.

"Yes—late as usual," answered his son. "She'll never run to table as long as Matthew Wilson drives her. Born late, that man, and not caught up his time. Can't make time, seemingly, like some clever souls here and there. Look at Ted Wilson in Seth Harry's shop to Okehampton. Own brother to that engine-driver; yet he uses time like a master."

Mr. Barkell was pleased.

"True, Richard, and a sharp thing to have marked in a youth like you. There's some men can make thirty minutes do the work of an hour—just like some can make thirty pence do the work of a crown. 'Tis just a gift of nature."

"Which you and me haven't got, my old dear."

Richard's parent stopped to blow.

"Very few men have got it," he answered, between his gasps. "'Tis mostly a female's art. Granted they ain't got our earning power; but 'tis a butivul arrangement an' makes a happy home where a man earns an' a woman saves. I wish you'd find such a one."

"Better still to do the saving and earning both yourself," said Dicky. "Here; take my arm, and don't talk no more till we get home-along."

He helped his father up the stiff slope where their little house stood, perched high upon the left shoulder of the valley.

CHAPTER IV

THE ISLAND OF ROCKS

ON a morning one month after the holiday with her lover, Ilet Yelland started early for the Moor. Her goal was the shaggy slope of Black Tor; and to reach it she passed easterly from her home, crossed Oke at a spot known as 'the Island,' which lies in the western branch of that river, and toiled onward up the opposite hill.

Above her stretched a marsh, ruled into black ridges by peat cutting. The place was approached by a rough track from Fishcombe Head Water, and here, suddenly, where the girl sat to rest awhile, a horse's head bobbed over the heather and a man's head followed it. A moment later Abel Pierce stopped his cart and stood beside his cousin. Since their parting near Bridgestowe they had not met.

Pierce hitched his whip over the hames of the horse's collar, then came across to where his cousin sat.

Much had happened in this man's mind, and he moved by nether ways of late. From the standpoint that all was fair under present circumstances, he had started and swiftly lost himself in darkness. His conscience and his intentions were at war. Once, in confidence, he had spoken to his mother and revealed a shadow of his purpose.

"'Twas robbery to come between," he said. "And such as him must be fought with his own weapons. An' one lie's so good as another. A lie is a good tool, mother."

"For a rascal," she answered, "not for my son, Abel."

"I only wanted to see what you'd think. No need to lie. Truth's strong enough. Do you mind the tale of Minnie Masters?"

"That's long forgot."

"People believe it yet here and there. I do for one."

Henny shook her head and looked very grave.

"Evil will come of this. Wolferstan made it clear as light that that wicked rumour was false. Why, near three years have passed since the poor creature drowned herself. You'll never bring up that. He might take the law of you."

But her son did not answer. It seemed to him that his last hope lay here. He knew Ilet and felt a vague belief that if the breath of this vanished scandal could be revived and reach her, something might come of it.

Now he met her, and she rose and smiled and shook hands heartily.

"Whatever brings you so far, Abel?"

"I'm here for another journey of peat for Bowden."

He pointed to chocolate-coloured sections of the fuel piled close at hand. Two and two the scads stood propped in pairs to dry. They dotted the heather beside the cuttings, like a little camp of fairy tents.

"And I've come for berries. The hills be purple with 'em, and they'm hanging well this year."

"All's well with you an' Aunt Susan?"

"All's well. An' with you?"

"All's blank. I love you so cruel."

"Dear Abel—an' don't I love you?"

"To be second's to be nought. I'm troubled, an' more than troubled. But how can I speak if one man's name mustn't be named between us?"

"Why not?"

"I can't speak of him with kindness, and won't any other way."

"You can't speak of him any other way," she said quickly.

"No living man can say a hard word of Dodd Wolferstan."

"A dead woman might. But you'm right: no living man—least of all me—be like to say a harsh syllable. Don't look like that—so fierce. I don't say as everybody believed it. I'd wring his neck to-morrow—for love of you; but I wouldn't hurt your feelings, I'm sure."

"That won't do for me," she answered slowly, and her mellow voice sank to lower depths. "You've said a thing that there's no unsaying. You said it deliberate. You meant to say it."

"It jumped out."

"Well go on. What more's to say?"

"Be I, as blesses your shadow, going to drop gall in your cup—now in your love-time? I'm sorry I spoke. 'Twas a thing blazed about long before ever you came to Sourton. A stupid rumour—dead, no doubt, now."

"Not dead in your mind."

"God curse me!" he burst out. "God strike me dumb. I'm never myself along with you. I wish to Christ I'd never seen your lovely face. You've ruined my life. Ax the man himself, if you care to know any more."

"Likely! As if I'd demean myself. Do I want to hear anything he don't please to tell me?"

"Then let it drop. I most wonder he didn't tell the tale after he'd got 'e safe. An' yet, I don't; for why should we cry stinking fish to them that love us?"

"Go!" she said. "What you've spoke have run through my head like water through a sieve. I laugh at it. I scorn it. I even forgive you for saying it."

"Well you might, if you knowed all there was in my heart for you. 'Twas only a pang brought the word out. I dare say 'tis a lie. He's a good man very like. I wish to God I was so good."

"I always thought you was good."

"Forget what I said."

"Nothing easier. 'Tis no more to me than last year's bad weather. Go about your business now, and let me set on mine."

"'Tis my only happiness left that you'm happy."

"Very well then. Make me happier by getting out of my sight."

He returned to his cart and began to pack the peat cakes into it. She sat with her thoughts working, as the storm wind works on the cloud. In her eyes the Valley of Rocks was mirrored. The word uttered had indeed been matter for scorn and laughter; but when the laughter ceased and the scorn turned cold, something remained. She was a proud woman, and the defects common to her qualities she did not lack. In her hot and loving heart existed ample room for jealousy. It occurred to her that Wolferstan had lived for thirty years before he heard her name. He was very handsome. He had confessed to friendship with his former master's daughter.

The day smiled clear and cool, touched with hazes of east

wind, that tempered the sunlight but cast no shadow. This aerial condition brought the huge composition of nature together, in a translucent and lilac light that leavened, without altering, the proper colours here harmoniously mingled. The brooding eyes of the woman saw Oke plunge through a glen beneath and part into twin cascades that foamed away to right and left of an island. Set in a ring of broken and dancing water, this islet shone. Trees, shrubs, grasses, ferns and plutonic rocks were cast together here in the lap of the hills, like a single jewel of many verdant hues—of sallow silvery and glittering birch, of golden green rowan and glaucous fern already touched to sudden gold in splashes. The grey boulders shone between; their granite ruled the living things, spread in tables, jugged in peaks, and finally massed into a tumult and riot of lovely rock forms, where the river joined her arms again, and peeped and twinkled amid mighty stones, with spout and thread and glassy convexity of prisoned light. Below were pools, little beaches of sand, and bogs dripping to the edge of the river, all lighted by the lamps of the asphodel; brightened by the red rosettes of the sundew, and the tiny butterwort's livid leaves; made beautiful by the pimpernel and the least bell-flower where they twined their pink and azure together. The water-ousel bobbed beside the river and, aloft, the ring-ousel uttered a note like the striking of flints, and showed his sooty plumage and the white half-moon upon his neck. Far distant on steep places, many rivulets flashed sun-messages as they leapt downwards to join the river. Their glint and movement added life to the texture of the mountain-side; while branches also waved, dead grasses shivered in paly sheets of light upon the open spaces; and brake-fern threw a slow movement of brightness over the hollows. Seen close, their spring and motion were very manifest. Every tall stem swayed an inch or two, carrying the waves of light as corn carries them; and each upspringing frond had worn a hole in the herbage under pressure of varying winds.

A faint and faded radiance still spread upon the western hills, where the ling now died; and above them, in shapes uncouth and monstrous, here huddled close, here scattered wide, like a herd of feeding dinosaurs or dragons from the earth's morning, there towered the hooded battlements and masses of Shilstone Tor. With tumultuous outlines it broke the sky, and

behind it, higher still, in shape of greater simplicity, the bosom of Corn Ridge flung its huge curve. Wrapped in a milky lustre as of pearl, it ascended and sank from south to north, and only one dim detail crowned the summit, where stood the tumulus of a stone man's grave.

Now all this gathered ripeness and fruition waited, in the brief splendour of autumn, for the rain to drown it and the frost to destroy. The pageant waxed as the year waned. Soaking desolation was near that would end all; winds were waking that would tear their gold from birch and ash, and send it whirling, on a thousand eddies of air and water, hurled by the elements back to the elements again.

Ilet stared at the Island of Rocks, but saw nothing. She was not in tune with Nature's mood, and neither perceived nor shared it. A great dragon-fly hawking beside her, startled her out of thought by the sudden rustle of its gauzes; then she sank back into her mind again. For once the waters that ran among the hills had no voice for her, no power to sweeten the corners of her thought. This crude poison stole into her crude spirit, and her unsophisticated heart began to suffer. The simplest, primal emotions awoke. Contagion worked swiftly in this pure environment, as the evil germ fastens first on a healthy subject brought within its reach. Great love will always smother weak principles, and now, all unused to man's way, Ilet writhed at this sudden shadow from her sweetheart's past, but did not yield to it. Finally she flung the thought from her with resolution, and rose to go about her business.

She picked at the whortleberries for some brief while, then gave it up and sat down again. Presently Abel Pierce returned to her before he started with a full cart.

"You'm not working," he said. "Don't sit here so glum and wretched. No man's all a loving woman thinks him. I didn't mean more than that—not much more. At least look at it from my side too. I knowed that when I spoke I must anger you; but I'd rather do even that than see your life ruined."

She stared in front of her and made no answer. So he left her and she heard his cart creak and jolt away. Then she began to pick the wild fruits again. But the monotony of this task was more than her mind could endure. She emptied her can of its purple, took her basket and started to tramp home.

Far off, unseen, Abel saw her go, and understood. She was a woman with a large heart—built in one chamber. Room there was for a single mastering interest, but her mind lacked machinery to weigh, to contrast, or to calculate. If he could separate her from Dodd Wolferstan, she would not go back to him. Half idly, half deliberately, half with intention and half by the accident of the opportunity, Pierce had called up a legend long dead. It was a lie and never had received much attention, save from the baser sort who love to smear dirt across a good name. But a thing ridiculed at the time might be revived to some purpose now. The mother of the girl who had drowned herself in Bude Canal still lived, and still swore that Wolferstan was the seducer. As for Abel, he felt no shame in reviving the falsehood. He very easily made himself believe it, and so justified his conduct to his conscience. He pretended with himself that he was doing right; and secretly the animal in him hoped that as a result of that bad day's work, there might fall blows between himself and the wronged man. He itched to deliver them, to fight for the woman and make good his claim, as the hart wins the hind. A subtler course, however, awaited him. Days were at hand that would see him suffer blows, not strike them, and reach his object by submission rather than assault.

CHAPTER V

PRIMROSE HORN

THE farm of Bowden was situated on lofty ground near the Moor edge; and South Down, the hill that rose before Pierce's cottage by Oke, formed its northern boundary. Beyond certain woods that crowned this height, the farmhouse itself stood and looked due west over Tamar to the high lands of Cornwall.

Now, on a Sunday morning, the daughter of the house made a special toilet at an hour but little earlier than noon. Her parents were worshipping in Bridgetstowe; the dwelling-place was silent and the hour was still. Sunshine streamed into Primrose's bedroom where she sat in a pale blue dressing-gown, doing her hair. On the table in front of her lay a fashion-plate, showing some new mode of coiffure; and she had arranged looking-glasses so that she might appreciate the effect she was creating. Her hands were lifted above her head; in her mouth was a thick lock of hair, and her teeth showed over it. Her beautiful neck bent towards the left-hand glass and her eyes were turned to another. Presently she lowered one hand very carefully to pick up a hairpin; but the mound of hair, like a little, shining barley-mow, fell suddenly in a great tumbled mass shot with sunshine. The work of five minutes was spoiled and her bright tresses dropped in a flood around her.

"Devil take the thing," she said out loud. Then she shook her eyes clear and began to study the picture again. While she perused the subtleties of an ugly head-dress, her fingers played with the hairpin she had picked up and twisted it this way and that, until it broke.

Primrose was eight-and-twenty, but the fact did not appear, and she carefully concealed it. She belonged to the blonde type of women who are lovely as flowers in their June, yet Time too often is hard with them afterwards. Alexander Horn was

exceedingly stout, but salvation for his daughter came through her mother's blood. Mrs. Horn lacked any figure worthy of the name and wore well.

Primrose was superbly fashioned and her athletic life kept her within the magic of absolute loveliness. Still, she looked ahead anxiously. Her face was a little worn with the physical exercise she took. She was rather under the middle height, and her soft, rich contours concealed small bones, but surprisingly hard muscles. Only herself and her horse knew the physical strength in her arms. She had seen men do things and, in secret, surprised herself to find their exploits not beyond her own power.

She was all woman, loved admiration, loved ease, and loved praise. With the successes of a country girl she had been long familiar. Her courage, her skill in horsemanship and her knowledge of the country enabled her to achieve great sporting triumphs. She had hunted since the fearless age of childhood, and, with years, her nerve never faltered. Yet behind it lay self-control and judgment. She took no needless risks.

This woman's beauty was arrestive. Her face had small features, but the grey eyes were large and lustrous. Her mouth was frankly Greek and of an unusual brilliance. Her gaze could be subdued to bewitching softness and her voice possessed none of that hard intonation common in the out-of-door girl. There was nothing about her that aped the male. No sequestered houri ever cooed more gently. She even sounded a note of helplessness sometimes, and it made strangers seek occasion to aid her. Young men often struggled to give her a lead; and the spectacle brought much amusement to those who knew Primrose in the hunting field. It was a favourite story that she had once shown the Master of the North Devon Foxhounds over a Dartmoor river. His name was Orlando Slanning—a noisy youth with more money than brains, and more good looks than either. But the sportsman quickly forgave Primrose and was now among her admirers.

Next to riding and driving, Miss Horn best liked the exercise of walking. She was a good Moor-woman, and enjoyed the life she had led; but her enthusiasm for it diminished as she grew older. Her days were uneventful. Sometimes she said that a row of cinnamon brushes with white tips represented the

best the world had given her. Certain minor romances had lightened her existence, but only one—with a fair and comely young doctor—personally interested Primrose. He had broken his neck on Dartmoor during the year that Dodd Wolferstan came to Bowden as bailiff.

She liked good looks in the male, and amused herself with ideas about men. Now certain matters were afoot, and she intended to marry. This morning she tired her hair for two visitors who were coming to midday dinner. One her heart hungered for and had long desired ; the other desired her.

Much common sense and the sportswoman's gift of patience belonged to her. She had also strength and intensity of purpose. The woman pretended to no social ambitions and kept within her class, albeit she might have ascended out of it. Certain younger sons had made frantic overtures on more than one occasion, but they were snubbed. She had a knack of appearing at meet just as hounds went to cover, and vanishing with the end of the sport.

Of the two men now approaching Bowden, one chanced to be that Orlando Slanning already mentioned ; the other was the Portreeve of Bridgetstowe.

No emotional passage had been exchanged between Alexander Horn's daughter and either of these men. In the matter of Slanning, the love was all on his side, and he had been twice rejected ; in Wolferstan's case the tenderness rested with her, and, though the veil was gently lifted once or twice before he left Bowden, his steadfast eyes, set on other things, had failed to understand her meaning, or guess her regard. She was not angry with him, for he had not slighted her. He had merely missed the possibility she indicated. There was no immediate hurry. Such sensuous love as she could feel went out to Dodd Wolferstan. She liked the clean, brisk, handsome body of him ; the high colour of him ; the voice of him ; his courage, wisdom, and even his religious faith in the principles and dogmas of that church on which he trusted. She knew he had a temper too, and would dominate. The belief that he must be strong enough to control her held some fascination in it. She had met no other man who could be trusted to do so. His battle with life also interested her. His dignity and self-dependence seemed remarkable in a workhouse boy. He had confided to her his own

hopes and aspirations ; but his ambition of ancestors she held a weakness—almost his only one.

Her life was unsettled and not happy since he had left Bowden. She pictured herself his wife presently, and sometimes she pretended with herself that he was waiting to win a position that would warrant a proposal. But common sense laughed at this conceit. She knew in reality that he loved her not at all ; yet, since he loved nobody else, she supposed he might be brought finally to love her if she played her part. Upon this conviction there had come the startling news that Dodd was engaged to an extremely humble girl at Sourton. Only love could have led him into such an error—and a very gigantic love—because Wolferstan had often spoken in the past of marriage and the vital factor a wife must be in the existence of any struggling, rising man. Primrose remembered the occasion of that sentiment and the tremor that had come to her while he spoke. But his bright, loveless eyes always acted like ice on her own secret heat. Now she wondered if their expression had changed and he had looked softly upon this maiden. She had considered the situation in all its bearings and taken the trouble to glean particulars concerning Ilet. The matter filled her life. She felt no sympathy for any but herself, and hope was not dead when she considered the mean nature of this engagement. She imagined possibilities, remembered the old rumour concerning Minnie Masters ; knew that it was a lie ; wished that it had been true ; doubted whether it would influence a sane woman in any case. When Dodd left Bowden, she had determined to keep in touch with him and never let him quite stray beyond the influence of the farm and those therein. She had expected that as years passed and Wolferstan began to consider the importance of a wife, he would probably look upon her in a new light. Now, however, he had both sought and found elsewhere. It might already be too late to turn him. As Abel Pierce reflected upon the woman, so now Primrose considered the man. Wolferstan had already been engaged for two months, and it was not through him but another that she learned the news. She held this a good rather than a bad sign. It argued a little uneasiness in his mind, a possible sub-consciousness that he had not acted wisely. But again her common sense tore to tatters this flimsy fancy, for the fact that he had not mentioned his engagement showed the

exceedingly slight significance in his own opinion of his friendship with Bowden.

To-day, however, he was coming to dinner, and the matter of his engagement must be touched upon. His happiness did not enter into her calculations; only her own concerned her. Him she could not force into matrimony; but at the bottom of her hot heart was a chilly resolution as yet scarcely revealed to herself. Primrose meant that if she did not marry him, no other woman should.

In this frame of mind she dressed her wonderful hair and put on her Sunday gown.

She was in the parlour five minutes before Mr. and Mrs. Horn drove home from Bridgetstowe, and noted that Dodd Wolferstan sat in the back of the Bowden vehicle. Her parents had picked him up after church. The other visitor was also of the company. Young Slanning, who came on horseback, had overtaken the dogcart returning. Orlando was a rich miller's son and dwelt at his home near Bridgetstowe. Of late life took a serious turn with him, for his father was dying of cancer. Soon he must bear on his own shoulders the burden of 'Slanning's,' as the mill was called.

The horseman rode a neat cob and looked exceedingly well upon it. He was handsome, after an obvious fashion, with large regular features, fine eyes, curling black hair, neat moustache and big rosy mouth that seldom lacked a cigar in the corner of it. Primrose rather admired him; his abundant energy interested her and his vanity caused her amusement. But while Wolferstan poured out his strength and manhood in self-advancement and the proper work of the world, young Slanning lived only for pleasure and to spend a better man's money. His father had spoiled him since his childhood, and now reaped the reward in mental anxiety which added a gloom to his death-bed. Orlando, having tried a merchant's office for one year and declared that his health could not stand the direful strain of London, had abandoned business and turned to a sportsman's pursuits. He possessed no talent, and least of all the talent for hard work. He was wax in the hand of any man or woman of character, but entertained a lively conceit of himself, and honestly imagined that few young fellows of six-and-twenty had justified their existence more handsomely. He patronized everybody save

Alexander Horn; but the stout, taciturn farmer, in that he was father of Primrose, always won a civility absurdly obvious by comparison with Slanning's usual cubbish manners. As Master of the North Devon Foxhounds, he had annoyed most men without humour, amused those who possessed it, and won the indifferent contempt of both classes. Yet he possessed virtues. He was generous, and good-tempered save where his vanity happened to be threatened. He sought a new thing hourly, and for the moment found himself keenly attracted by the operations of the local yeomanry. He had secured a commission in this force and now went under the delusion that he was a military man. He spoke of "the service" and affected the company of soldiers.

Primrose greeted both guests and shook hands with them. She observed that Mr. Slanning had taken to an eyeglass since their last meeting. He fought with this from time to time, and held it in his right eye after a fashion that he believed to be martial.

"Morning, Miss Horn. I've got a big crow to pick with you," he began. "Yes—really. Never once—never once did you come to the camp when we were under canvas at Hey Tor."

"'Tis such a way. But I thought of you and was glad you had fine weather."

"By Jove—wet or fine, it's all one in camp, I can tell you. Work—nothing but work from *reveille* to dark. And night attacks too!"

"What a hero!" she said, then turned to Wolferstan.

Slanning took his horse to the stable, and Primrose was left for a moment with the Portreeve.

"But this is great news! Why ever didn't you tell me, Dodd?" she began at once.

"I ought to have. I'm much to blame. I was going to to-day."

"We have only heard the bare fact. What is her name? Where does she live? Is she very pretty? Do I know her?"

"She's called Ilet—Ilet Yelland—and she lives with her aunt at Sourton."

"Old Susan Yelland! She used to work at—I know whom you mean."

"And she is pretty—very—at least, I think so; and you don't

know her, but I hope you soon will. Now all your questions are answered."

"I've fifty more. Dark or fair?"

"Dark."

"May I ask her age?"

"Twenty-three."

She shook his hand warmly and pressed it.

"I hope you'll be very, very happy, Dodd."

"Thank you very much, Primrose. But I must be. I can't realize my wonderful fortune yet."

Suddenly Miss Horn gave a gasp. She produced a handkerchief, put it to her eyes and rushed away from him into the house.

He stared uneasily and was glad that nobody had seen her. At dinner she appeared calm, smiling, bright as usual.

Mr. Horn carved the beef. He was a blonde, fat man of sixty, and his daughter had received her wide grey eyes from him. As a cattle-breeder the farmer claimed an honourable position in the West Country and beyond it. His name was responsible for many stupid jests among those familiar with the matter of short horns and long horns. Mr. Horn ate beef as he bred it: with judgment. He spoke not a word until the sirloin, Yorkshire pudding and vegetables had gone. Then he picked his teeth with a gold pin which he kept stuck in the lapet of his waistcoat for that purpose, nodded to himself once or twice, and poured out a glass of ale.

His wife was not a great talker, but far less silent than her husband. Orlando Slanning, however, enjoyed the company of silent people, since, after hounds, his own voice was the music that he best loved. He prattled now of the yeomanry, now of manœuvres, now of what would happen to the War Department if he was made head of it. He appeared recently to have studied printed pages—a very unusual performance with him.

"I do believe you've read a book!" cried Primrose. "Father, Mr. Slanning's read a book!"

"Why not?" asked the farmer.

"Of course—that's why you bought the eyeglass, wasn't it?"

Orlando smiled at her question.

"I say, that's too bad—really."

"I'm sure I hope your sight isn't giving you any trouble," said

Mrs. Horn kindly. She was a faded, brown, thin woman, with gentle eyes. By some trick of atavism she had developed a strong sentimentality and an immature feeling for art. These peculiarities she kept to herself. They took the humble form of admiring flowers or sunsets, and reading such scraps of poetry as occurred in the local journal. They also appeared in the exceedingly inappropriate name that she had given to her daughter. She went and came like a shadow, and dominated the scene no more than some faint, ever-present picture hung upon the wall.

"Nothing serious—really. Just to help me to see what my fellows are doing sometimes on field days."

"You manage it capitably," said Primrose. "I should like to have a photograph of you with that in your eye."

"I say! would you? Then you shall—the very next time I'm in Plymouth. In my mess jacket—eh? It's rather——"

"Eat your pudden," said Mr. Horn, "else leave it. We've all done."

The farmer and his wife respected Dodd Wolferstan and Mrs. Horn knew that Primrose did more than respect him. At one time, before their bailiff left them, the parents had discussed him as a possible husband for their only child. But Dodd departed to pursue his life's story elsewhere, and the persistent Slanning became more and more apparent. Like the rest of the world, Alexander Horn perceived that he was but a slight man; nevertheless, he now wanted Orlando for his daughter and was doing what he could to help the match. He knew the young miller's weakness, but he also knew his own child's strength, and felt satisfied that, once married, Primrose would take the whip hand as a matter of course. Orlando was the sort of youth (so the farmer believed) whose career depended more upon his wife's character than his own. He was weak, not in the least wicked. Moreover, he must soon be very comfortably off.

After dinner the men walked in the garden and Primrose went with them; but Mrs. Horn stayed indoors, put up her feet and read Keble.

Dodd was called to leave Bowden in a short while, that he might get back to Bridgetstowe for his class. After noon on Sundays he gathered a company of lads about him and taught them what he knew concerning conduct and religion. He

instilled much of his own enthusiastic and devout faith into the hearts of younger men ; and he enjoyed the work.

Primrose Horn walked with the Portreeve as far as Bowden gate ; and while they were absent Mr. Slanning talked to the farmer. They sat together in a little summer-house, and Orlando did the conversation.

"Awfully lovely she is. The belle of the countryside easily. Not a girl within miles of her. And such a seat ! I've heard experienced men from the shires say they never saw a woman quite so absolutely perfect on horseback—really. And her pluck ! But I needn't tell you these things, because if you don't know 'em, who should ? But, all the same, I don't think you and Mrs. Horn quite realize what a wonder she is. And how good !—her goodness is terrific. But you live with her and have got accustomed to it. But the rest of the world is awfully keen about it. I wish to God she'd take a fancy to me—to God I wish it !"

"Why not ?" asked Mr. Horn.

Then Orlando rolled on again. He chattered without intermission for five minutes, and as his remarks were now transferred from Primrose, and occupied with his own ambitions for the future and achievements in the past, the young man's tongue flew swiftly and his statements increased in splendour. He surprised himself with the brilliant case he put ; and he only ceased speaking when a gentle, inarticulate sound revealed the fact that Alexander Horn had gone to sleep. The farmer's hands were folded over his stomach ; his legs were extended before him ; the lower buttons of his waistcoat were unfastened.

Orlando, muttering a word expressive of annoyance, jumped up and went to meet Primrose, who was now returning. Reduced to a speck, Wolferstan strode along the way westerly.

"Good, worthy chap, that," said Slanning, who suspected Miss Horn's weakness. "What a glutton for work ! And anxious to do good in his parochial way. Really a very decent fellow—considering how he's raised himself."

"I'm glad you admire him," she said.

"Rather—we're very good friends."

"He would like to hear your opinion, I think. It might change his own view."

"He's a humble beggar—eh ?"

"His own view of you, I mean; not his view of himself."

"His view of me!" exclaimed Orlando, shaken from complacency. "Has he got a view of me? Rather cheek—don't you think?"

"A cat may look at a king; a Portreeve may form an opinion of a miller's son."

"I *hate* you to call me a miller's son!"

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know: it sounds so feeble."

"It's true—as true as that I'm a farmer's daughter. I suppose you'll be a full-blown miller yourself presently, when your father dies."

"Worse luck! But what did young Wolferstan say of me?"

"'Young Wolferstan!' He's years older than you are."

"To my wider experience of life he seems young—almost a boy."

"We can't all have your immense advantages. As you ask, I may tell you that, when mentioning you, he said 'poor Slanning'."

Orlando stared with real astonishment.

"Not even 'mister'?"

"No; just 'poor Slanning', in a particularly kind tone of voice."

"'Poor Slanning'! 'Poor Slanning'! What the deuce did he mean? I could buy him up a hundred times over."

"Of course you could."

"Then what——?"

"Don't ask me, my dear man."

"'Poor Slanning'. The fellow's a fool!"

"He couldn't mean money. He knows that you are rich—for a miller's son."

"If he didn't mean money, what did he mean?"

She abstained from enlightening him.

"I'm not pleased," continued Orlando. "I shan't forgive that in a hurry. You oughtn't to be so jolly friendly with these low people."

"I don't think I ought—really," she answered, mimicking him to his face. Then she wakened Mr. Horn by kissing her parent's pendulous cheek.

Slanning turned away both puzzled and annoyed.

"Damn the man!" he thought.

CHAPTER VI

LINTS TOR

THREE days later chance sent Miss Horn to Okehampton. She drove a dogcart and was alone save for the company of two young children. She had overtaken the little things on their way to school and, since the morning was wet and their struggles with an old umbrella unavailing, had stopped and picked up the boy and girl, who were known to her.

As they proceeded at an increased pace, they came suddenly within sight of a traction-engine which travelled toward them; but the driver, concerned with his own affairs, did not see that Primrose had held up her hand. Her young horse was timid and now he flinched, broke out of his trot, and became unmanageable at the sound of the snorting engine. Miss Horn cried to a man who was leaning over a gate by the way, and, turning, he hastened into the road and shouted to the driver of the locomotive. A moment later it stopped and after much persuasion and patience, Primrose, with the help of Abel Pierce, succeeded in getting her steed past the engine and the trucks behind it. A hot puff of oily air came from this monster, and the horse shivered and snorted until he was clear of it.

"Lucky I met you, Pierce," said Primrose, who knew the labourer as an occasional worker at Bowden. "Who's that fool on the engine? He ought to lose his job."

"'Tis Sam Brown, miss. There'll be an accident some day. He's a sorrowful man, an' always brooding, an' ain't got very good sight neither. They dear little childer too!"

"Well, I'm much obliged to you."

"An' welcome, miss."

Something about the labourer arrested her attention. She had known him for a cheerful man; but his face was long to-day and his voice inert.

"Are you out of work?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Plenty doing, miss, but——"

"You were standing looking over that gate—luckily for me."

"I be a thought down-daunted along of a thing or two. I'm taking a holiday. But please don't tell nobody. I didn't ought to be."

She wondered at what might induce a spirit of depression in this man. Labouring people did not win her sympathy. She regarded them as necessary, but not more interesting than a steam plough or mechanical seed drill. That such a man as Pierce could be either much uplifted, or downcast, seemed absurd to her.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked.

"Don't tell none I be loafing," he repeated. "Least of all Mr. Horn—such a towser for work as him. 'Tis only to-day."

"I'm sorry you are troubled," she said, and Abel looked surprised, for he knew well enough that the farmer's daughter was considered a hard woman. Remembering the past position of Wolferstan at Bowden, he pondered with himself. He recollected how rumour had once linked the Portreeve's name with Miss Horn's. While he thought, his eyes unconsciously brightened, because they rested on the two little children. Them he loved. It was an inner part and characteristic of Pierce to do so, and children always found him willing and gentle. He smiled now at a small, yellow-haired girl, and put up his hand to feel her cheek.

"'Tis hard to be happy, miss," he said, "hard to be happy when you'm growed to the thinking age. I be disappointed of a great hope."

"Ah!—you're not the only man in the world in that fix."

Something urged him to speak openly.

"Do 'e chance to know a maiden by name of Ilet Yelland?" he asked.

Her lips tightened, but she did not change colour.

"Some tale that Mr. Wolferstan——" she said.

"More'n a tale—— Ah, Daisy,"—he broke off and spoke to the little girl. "You mind, Daisy, my pretty, never you let two men love 'e to once when you grow wife-old. 'Tis—'tis hell for one of 'em."

The woman grew interested. Her horse was impatient, but she quieted it with a word. Then she turned to Abel.

"More than a tale! How do you know?"

"For a very good reason. I'd thought that Ilet Yelland would have married me. I'm her cousin."

"What! He's marrying a woman who might have married you?"

"Ess fay! Or a crowned king. There's no other such she—I—— But what's this to you? I'm so full of it, that 'twill out, miss."

"Had she promised you?"

"Not that, but so good as. I'd come to feel 'twas to be—so had my mother. 'Twas clear like without words. If I'd but spoken afore she seed him, she would have said 'yes'. But, like a daft fool, I drifted on contented."

"You men are sheep in such matters."

"He wasn't. He courted her like a fire courts an old straw rick. I was working to Tavistock for a week, an' when I comed home they was tokened. An' she loving me very well all the time, for she said so."

"But him better—naturally."

Abel dropped his head and felt the sting.

"Naturally—no doubt—such a fine, church-going, well-thought-on man."

The little boy in the dogcart here ventured to speak. He was waiting uneasily for Primrose to drive on, and he and his sister had whispered together once or twice.

"Please, miss—if us may get down an' travel? Us shall be cruel late an' get into trouble, if you please."

"I'll drive you to the school-house door," she answered; then spoke to Pierce.

"You are a good deal interested in this affair, of course—if, as you say, you were practically engaged to your cousin?"

The labourer was playing with Daisy again, and looking into the innocent, staring eyes of the child. They were like the white of the plover's egg: just touched with faintest pearly azure, and in them the iris rested deliciously blue. Her little hands held Abel's whiskers.

"Give me a kiss an' I'll give 'e a halfpenny," he said.

Daisy obeyed at once, and he held her head to his cheek that

her lips might stay on it. Primrose saw fleeting happiness pass over his face at the touch.

"You're fond of children?"

"More than that, miss, somehow. I've got a queer feeling for 'em."

"I like them till they grow old enough to lie an' whisper against us. Then I hate them. What you have said has rather surprised me—for a private reason."

"Knowing one of the parties so well, I dare say it might."

She regarded him sharply and divined at least a part of his meaning.

"Where are you working to-morrow?"

"At a job a thought out of the common. There was a man died to Okehampton last year, and now his wife wants a bit of moor-stone to set unwrought upon his grave. I know just such a piece, and I be going to show it to Joshua Bloom from Arscott's granite works at Belstone to-morrow."

"Where is it?"

"Away up over, 'twixt Lints an' Dinger. They'll fetch a cart by New Bridge on Blackavon."

"When will you be there?"

"Late afternoon, miss."

"I'll ride that way between four and five. Keep your eye on Lints Tor, and, when you see me there, come across. I've got something to say to you."

"I'll come, miss."

"But don't mention who 'tis when you see me; and don't name the matter to anybody."

Leaving him to reflect on this strange appointment, and rich with ample matter for her own thoughts, the woman started her steed into a swift trot. Daisy crowed with delight and clung to her brother's arm. Primrose, well used to the flying wind against her face, narrowed her eyes a little and put the whip in its socket.

When she returned that way, two hours later, Pierce was gone, but he had only just departed. For many minutes he stood, leaning over the gate, with his mind full of this remarkable experience. Of a superstitious spirit, he felt strongly how greater powers than his own were taking up the thread of his enterprise and about to weave their proper pattern into it. The object of

Primrose he already suspected. Even as he in secret had cast about for some stout aid against his rival, so it seemed that she too had similarly sought. And she had found him. He stared out at the chance which had brought them together, as though it was a physical object and could be seen. He knew perfectly well what Miss Horn would have to say. It struck him that he might meet her half way and surprise her at the amount of his wits. But already he perceived that her part would be very secret and very difficult. He guessed that she must also be using her brains assiduously just then; and he was right. While he debated slowly and solidly, Miss Horn's swifter intelligence covered wide countries and attacked the problem from a hundred separate standpoints. She was alive to the exceeding danger of the thing she had suddenly planned; but therein lay its salt. Keen spice to life offered before the spectacle of the love-lorn Pierce. The game was worth the candle, for possible success would justify the risk of possible failure. At best a bold move might win Wolferstan; at worst she could only stand with respect to him where now she stood. Failing actual possession of him, nothing mattered. His opinion of her signified not at all—excepting in the event of marriage. In any other relation hate was as welcome to her as indifference. There must, however, be no danger of truth escaping to poison success after the event; if success came. Therefore her first determination was better to study Pierce when next they met, and learn whether indeed he might be found trustworthy and meet for such a task.

To the tryst she came riding, and from the low hill of Lints surveyed a scene of huge and simple planes subtending the river at her feet and rising round about her. Oke wound hither and thither—a glittering thread from its confines in Cranmere. It passed under Fordsland Ledge upon the one hand and the boggy desolation of Amicombe Hill upon the other. Mighty ravines haunted by shadows and falling waters faced northerly, and to the south the slopes of High Willhayes made a theatre for the display of complete cloud shadows. Their masses marked the ridges and threw hillocks and stones into relief; their outlines ever changing, ever moving, now transformed the silver of waters into lead, now imposed a tone of pure purple upon the jade-green of the waste. Scotch cattle—black and dun—roamed in scattered herds along; and upon a knap

that rose between her standpoint and the rocks of Dinger Tor, Primrose marked men with a horse and cart standing beside them. Here certain labourers struggled at a great stone; and just as it lay, crusted with lichens and rich in green pads of moss tucked within its crannies, they heaved it from its situation and slowly dragged it up into their cart.

Primrose waited and watched the operation. Then a figure separated itself from the group, sank down over the hill and crawled like a fly toward her. In reality, however, Pierce advanced with speed. After ten minutes he stood beside her and touched his hat.

"I'm feared I've kept 'e, miss."

"No matter. The stone served?"

"It done very well, old Bloom said."

"And now, Abel Pierce, tell me——"

She made a long pause and then broke off.

"Sit down on the turf and listen carefully."

"Thank you, miss; I'll bide where I be."

"I was going to say, tell me why you're so fond of children."

He stared at the unexpected question, grinned and scratched his head. Having done so, he let his hat lie upon the ground and brushed the moisture from his forehead.

Primrose had never seen him uncovered, and now observed that his dark face was handsome as well as mournful, and that his eyes were not only restless, but also intelligent. Her hopes increased.

"Childer?" he asked. "How can I say? Why do you like hosses?"

"They don't change. They are honest beasts."

"So's the childer. Honesty's their strong part. 'Tis strange, but there's that in 'em always touches me same as church-going touches some folk. To pat their little heads and hear their moosic! So full of gert to-morrows they be! Such hope an' trust to 'em! They shame grown-ups—at least——"

But she had not come to proceed upon this sentimental line, and now she interrupted him.

"You'll be a happy father yourself some day, perhaps."

"By God—if——" The softness faded out of his eyes. They glowed at her and his voice echoed harshly. "All of you," he continued roughly. "'Tis the best we can say of all of you—or any—that you may be mothers."

"You mean that evidently. Now you're waking up. Then, if you feel so, it seems a pity that the woman you love and who loved you——"

"I know," he broke in. "List to me, please, first. I'm quite clear why we're here together, and a word from me will save your time. No need to wind into this business cautious and careful after the usual woman's way. I ban't shamed at the hot, naked thing in my heart, whatever else I'm shamed of. I'd give my eternal soul ten thousand times over to be the father of childer by that woman—that's how I stand."

Primrose drew in her breath sharply. Terrific vigour marked his grating, longing accents. Like the gigantic breath of an ocean wind they came and smote the listener. The very spirit of truth inspired his passionate speech.

"That's love," she said. "I'm glad you spoke like that. You're a man. We've reached the heart of this matter by a short cut. You must have what you want, and I'll help you to get it."

"Can you?"

"Yes, I believe so. We're merely male and female over this business. You, who know what you feel, can probably guess why I'm here and why I speak so plainly."

"Yes, I know."

"Say it then. Say it in words," she answered. "I like the way you tore that thing out of your heart and showed it to me raw. I want to hear you say what's in my bosom, as you said what was in your own. Don't be frightened of plain words. Talk to me as if you were talking about me behind my back—not with a woman, but with another man. I love plain speaking—sometimes."

But that he would not do, though he understood her. He shook his head and did not answer.

"At any rate you know?" she asked.

"I suppose you want the man—only within the bounds of——"

"Without bounds," she said. "Since you're shy, I'll say it. 'Tis interesting to meet a man like you. I don't feel you are a man, for that matter, but just a fine hunger loose on two legs. I want Wolferstan every bit as much as you want that woman."

"You ban't afear'd of words either then."

"How far would you go to stop this marriage?"

"I've told you: I'd go to raging hell to stop it."

"What did you mean to do about it before I met you?"

He looked doubtful.

"All be fair in love, according to the old——"

"Don't twaddle," she said impatiently. "We've got beyond that. This thing is your life. It isn't my life, but it's the salt of my life. I can live without Wolferstan, but to have him would make my life a great deal better worth living. You understand that?"

He nodded.

"What sort of a woman is this Ilet Yelland?"

"A truth-loving, fierce sort of woman—a woman as can only do one thing at a time, and see one thing, and love one thing at a time. I've dropped one drop of poison, for that matter."

"Tell me."

"You mind the story of Minnie Masters—her that drowned herself and her child in Bude Canal?"

"Nobody ever believed that."

"I did—always. And a good few other neighbours. How if 'twas true?"

"He's not that sort of man."

"Every man's that sort of man, come time and chance and his fire up. The woman's mother believed it, for she cussed Wolferstan in the public street the day her darter was buried; and the old soul had to be locked up for a while, because parson wouldn't read the burial service over Minnie, but only a bit of it. And she said she'd cut his cowardly tongue out. Well, that woman's alive."

"You want to get Ilet Yelland to believe this?"

"'Twould shake her if I could."

"It's strong enough?"

"For her, yes, I reckon so. You mean it wouldn't be strong enough for you, miss?"

"That's no matter. Supposing you're wrong and she laughs at it?"

"She did laugh at it—coming from me; but 'twas a left-handed laugh. I know her every sound."

"If he had done it and confessed it, that wouldn't make her

give him up; but if he denied it, and she was positive he lied——”

She was silent, and then continued.

“The thing must be proved to her mind—thrust into it—stamped into it. Try and make other people believe it too. If she finds a dozen to do so, she will begin to doubt. Then she taxes him——”

“And he denies it,” said Pierce.

“That’s what I know and you don’t,” answered Primrose. “’Tis odds but he might not deny it. If the thing fell like a thunderbolt and he was in his angry vein, he wouldn’t deny it. He’d flash into fury that anybody alive could dare even to raise the question.”

“What’s to do then?”

“Evidence. Suppose this old woman was able to say that her daughter accused Wolferstan with her last breath and then went out to the canal. Very likely that is what happened.”

Pierce looked at her face. It was beautiful beyond belief and flushed with excitement.

“You’re the axe for this tree, sure enough,” he said. “The old woman would swear anything, no doubt.”

“Or you might remind him that he confessed to you that he ruined the girl after it happened. One man’s word is as good as another.”

“No, no, it ban’t. You’re out there. His word’s better than mine—every day of the week—as much better as his position and eggication.”

“Tell the girl’s people—the dead girl, I mean—that ’tis well known Wolferstan ruined her and sent her to her grave. Tell everybody. It should be known. There’s to be a colt drift at Halstock Pound next week. Can you be there?”

“I’ve got to be there, to help with the work.”

“He will be among the men driving in the ponies, and I am going to ride over too. A crowd always comes. That’s your chance for the first shot.”

“Us must get Ilet there,” he said.

“She is to be there. He is going to introduce me to her. A great chance to strike the first blow.”

“Before company?”

“The more the merrier.”

"I be going to do the work, then?"

"Your share—yes. You ought to be proud of it, and proud to think how I trust you. But I shan't shirk my part. I'll console him in secret. I'll believe nothing against him. I may even lose my temper and beat you across the face before everybody. Don't be surprised if I do."

"Lord, what a light you throw upon this job!"

"Repeat the old rumour openly at the drift and see what may come of it."

"His whip-lash will come of it. There won't be no call for you to use yours."

"So much the better. A few bruises don't matter if there's Ilet to kiss them well. Wolferstan's an exceedingly Christian sort of man, but he's got a temper. He may be patient, or he may take the law into his own hands. And you might remind him that he did confess the truth to you. Stick to that through thick and thin; and invent the details, and stick to them too. A lie is often just as hard to disprove as the truth is to establish. Let a thing be repeated often enough and people must begin to believe it and make others believe it."

She turned to her horse.

"Give me a hand," she said.

He held his palm for her; her foot touched it and she was in the saddle.

"Don't waste time," she concluded. "This silly love between them—what is it? Only a few months old at best. Loose the whirlwind and scorch it up. Our powder and shot is rather scanty. We mustn't throw any away. Keep off love with Ilet Yelland. Be cold and indifferent there. 'Twould be better for your future chances if any but you could separate them; but there's nobody else to do it."

He nodded and she rode away, crossed the river and vanished westerly.

"Let what will come, there's amusement in it," she reflected. "'Tis hunting of a sort. Fox-hunting—man-hunting—what more has life for me?"

Abel too moved homeward. He did not anticipate overmuch amusement from his future. In his shadowed mind dwelt darkness deeper than the oncoming gloom, where night shouldered day and rolled up from the central loneliness of the Moor in a

cloud of rain. He felt that the woman was far too clever for him, that he was to be her tool rather than her accomplice in this infamy. Yet he perceived that she had put herself into his power.

"If I go down on it, she does too," he thought ; and the determination calmed him.

Black fleeces ridge on ridge rose from the edge of the earth and drove gloomily forward. Night in a storm-cloud swept out of the East, and the familiar crying of the wind on the stone awoke. From that hour it rained without intermission for three days, and through many weeks no human soul again stood where these two had met and brought forth evil. Only the fox dragged his brush through the mire, and the wild cattle snorted at the hole whence a gravestone had been dragged—snorted and stamped uneasily, scenting man.

CHAPTER VII

THE DRIFT

AFTER centuries of roaming, the Dartmoor pony has attained to the dignity of a legal institution, and among those survivals of ancient custom still exercised by the Duchy of Cornwall, is the colt-drift, a ceremony in which these little beasts are principal performers. The secret of the appointed day is kept as close as possible, in order that 'foreigners' who can claim no venville rights of pasture, may be caught and their owners fined. In olden days this numbering of the pony people was a matter involving some state and solemnity; now the rite is robbed of its more picturesque array.

On an autumn morning men and women, some riding and some afoot, proceeded in irregular lines across the Moor, and converged upon Halstock Pound nigh the farm of that name on Halstock Hill. The drift was in the north quarter of the Forest, and those Moor-men responsible for this great tract had charge of the operations. Already a few ponies were enclosed, and from time to time, over the heather ridges southerly, trotting droves, with manes and tails flying and little foals galloping among them, would appear and be rounded up into the pound by busy dogs and shouting men.

From Belstone and Okehampton, the people came to see the sight. Those officially engaged were already riding far away on the waste and bringing up the colts from their favourite 'strolls' and haunts in the lonely places. Out of Meldon valley old Abner Barkell and a friend or two trudged together. Behind them came Ilet Yelland and her cousin, Abel Pierce. She went to meet Wolferstan; he came to work. Elsewhere, on horseback, trotted Primrose Horn, escorted by Orlando Slanning and a few other young sportsmen.

A man who looked eighty years old, but was in reality some ten years less, discoursed with Abner Barkell upon the event of the day. He was a shepherd and had lived on Dartmoor all his life.

"Not what it did use to be," he said. "The vartue have gone out of it an' the secret of the day's not kept same as once. I mind when we never knowed till the very morn, an' then horns blowed upon the mountain-tops, as sudden as the crack of doom will be out of the angels' trumpets. Many a bold feller, who had his ponies running unbeknownst, was catched out in them days an' fineed five shilling in the face of the nation. But Duchy's not what it was, though never a thing to be proud of. The law's gone weak—along of Beaconsfield, I suppose; though God forbid as I should heave a stone at the dead."

Mr. Barkell nodded approval, and a farmer, who had joined them, spoke.

"Every word true, Ned Perryman," he said. "Duchy be no more'n a big name for a very onrighteous contrivance. It laughs at the weak an' lets out our birthright to anybody as offers cash. Money's the Duchy's god, to be plain."

"There ain't many on Dartmoor has a good word for it, seemingly," declared Abner. "All the same, you'll do well to be careful what you say, for there's all sorts about this morning. If his honour the Prince of Wales heard you——"

"I wish he could," burst out Mr. Perryman. "*He* don't know nought about it. When royal princes go abroad, the truth's always hidden behind flags an' banners, an' drowned wi' brass moosic. Look at it! What reward do me an' the likes of me get for keeping up wi' the times? Let Duchy find that us can add a room to our cottages, or sweeten a bit of the fen an' build a tidy wall round it, what do it do? Pat us on the back an' reward us? No, by Gor! Down comes—you know who—like a raven, an' sticks another pound on the rent. 'Tis worse than infidel Turks an' a crying outrage on Christianity."

The shepherd's voice rose and his black eyes flashed. He believed, not without reason, that he had suffered from petty injustice for half a century.

His grand-daughter Jane, a tall, hard-faced and angular young woman, walked beside him.

"Hush, my dear," she said. "Us all know you for a very

radical old man and very valiant also ; but 'tis vain to grow hot. Us can't mend it."

"Justice never do come out top, Jane, onless by chance 'tis stronger than t'other, which seldom happens," remarked Mr. Barkell. "You Moor folk whine about in public-houses," he continued, "but what's the good o' that? If you want to be heard, you must do what other people do an' shout together. That's how us railway men get on in the world. An' if you can't shout loud enough, owing to ignorance, you ought to scrape up a bit of money an' pay a lawyer chap to shout for 'e."

"So I always have said," replied Perryman. "The thing did ought to be laid afore Parliament, an' when our side gets in again, I hope it will be. We'm the lawful citizens up here, an' Duchy's a law-breaker. The very place we be walking now is sold over our heads to the military, for them to bang their blasted cannons an' rob us of our grazing rights for miles an' miles."

Not far off Pierce walked beside Ilet Yelland ; but they said very little, for the shadow cast at their meeting above the Island of Rocks had deepened. Ilet suffered at the insinuation against her betrothed, and was hurt to the heart that Abel could have made it. He had been content to let the idea fester for a time ; and now, in light of what was to come, he approached the subject abruptly as they neared Halstock Pound.

"I spoke for your good and nought else," he said. "I must suffer, it seems ; but you'll be sorry some day ; for nobody sticks up for truth like you do. I know what I said be gospel ; but I shouldn't have said it out unless your life had depended on it. Now I'll say it out again ; an' if I can only save you, I don't care what happens to me."

"Not one word will I believe against him. If there was anything—but 'tis a mad thought. Open as the morning sun, an' as honest. His face is enough."

"Faces ! Ban't every muscle of a man's face trained to hide his meaning? Haven't you larned not to show what you feel an' think? 'Tis the first thing everybody larns. Do you let your mind look out of your eyes? Not you ! The man's cruel as the grave an' hard as a stone, behind that straight glance. He ruined Minnie Masters ; an' I know it ; an' now you know it. Ax him an' look close when he answers."

"I'd rather die than ax him."

"You'll do wiser to, all the same."

"If he heard this, he'd break every bone in your body, Abel."

"He might, an' welcome, if he could disprove it."

"Right well you know 'tis a lie."

"Ax him," repeated the other. "Let him only prove that dead woman went to her grave with a falsehood on her lips, and I'll be best man at his wedding, if he likes. Till then I say he's an evil liver and a double-dealing, cruel devil. There's the man! And to his face I'll say what I have said to you."

Behind five-and-thirty ponies galloped Wolferstan and another rider. Three sheep-dogs assisted them. The cavalcade swept past and Dodd turned in his saddle and shouted,

"See you later!"

Then a hollow hid them from view.

Ilet said but one word more. To her it seemed that honesty and truth incarnate had ridden past in the person of the Portreeve.

"'Tis an insult to him to listen to you, and I'll not do it. My heart's not sad for myself—not sad nor distrustful neither. I be only sad for you, that you can think so foul; an' for my man, that he've got such an enemy. But yesterday he told me he hadn't one enemy in the world."

"Another lie. He knows better."

They were now among the scattered folk who approached Halstock Pound, and the stone walls of the inclosure appeared.

Men crowded at the gate, and the drove that Wolferstan had brought up now trotted in to join the rest. Spectators stood round with heads and shoulders above the dry-built barriers; and some sat upon the walls to watch the moving mass of little horses within.

Like beads scattered irregularly the ponies came streaming along with blowing hair and tossing heads. They hustled and jostled, turned and twisted; but evasion was vain and all presently found themselves impounded. Here grey and russet, iron-grey, bay and black assembled in a growing crowd; and every sort and shape of moorland steed was here—from the pot-bellied, cow-hocked, ancient mare, as familiar with drifts as the Moor-men themselves, to the little, frightened foal, six weeks old. The small, woolly things ran about on their spindle legs and

uttered frantic expressions of dismay if swept for a moment from their mothers' sides. One tiny golden chestnut, like a ray of sunlight, flashed and scampered about among the darker colts, half in fear, half in fun. The air was full of neighings and whinnies, now thin and shrill, now frantic, now inquiring, now protesting, now sinking upon a guttural note of recognition, or rising into a scream of temper. The ponies were never silent and never motionless. They chattered in their own language without intermission; and they swept round and round, this way and that, until the eye was dazzled by this kaleidoscopic maze of horsey colours. A running fire of noise and shifting field of hue they presented. Fresh arrivals were met with a chorus of questions; then they answered and lifted their voices with the rest and joined the increasing throng. Now little separate stampedes occurred; now sudden explosions of sound as a dozen wide, red nostrils simultaneously snorted and quivered. Squeals of rage punctuated the din, and, under all, was the throb and thud of small, unshod hoofs that never stilled and swiftly trampled the pound to mire. Sometimes a pair of heels came with a bang into a neighbour's ribs; sometimes white teeth flashed and the little beasts reared to bite each other. Duns and browns and dirty whites were woven into this pattern of moving pony backs. It was touched with the darkness of manes and tails, brightened with shining noses, alive and alert with pricking ears and glittering eyes. Dartmoor and Exmoor mingled here, and experts pointed the difference; men moved fearlessly amid the mass; a hot equine smell rose dense in the air—the atmosphere proper to a drift. All the ponies were marked, with a plait in the tail or a string in the ear, and now the new-born foals received some sort of sign by which they should be known. The little, bright chestnut fought valiantly, and it took Abel Pierce and another to hold him by nose and tail, while a third, with a pair of shears, clipped a letter on his infant coat. Then into a corner the small thing stole trembling and sweating from this, his first battle with his master.

Typical as the rough ponies were those who strode among them. Here were the brown-faced, grey-haired Moor-men; here labourers and yelling boys; here farmers, owners, sportsmen, and a dapper and prosperous spirit or two, with some smattering of science and an interest in improving the breed. These authori-

ties talked learnedly ; while labourers captured the new-born horses and let the fillies, mares, and geldings go free again. The liberated colts kicked up their heels, squealed joyfully, and galloped off with sheep-dogs, like their lupine ancestors, yelping and snapping in a pack behind them.

The crowd increased. Young Slanning discoursed with his friends on pony-rearing ; Pierce, forgetting the first business that brought him, worked hard with the ponies and yet found time to help half a dozen little children on to the pound wall ; old Ned Perryman stood lowering from under white eyebrows at the Bailiff of the Duchy, who had just arrived. To Ned's eye this inoffensive person represented the darkest force in his life. Mr. Barkell helped to tap a barrel of beer ; Ilet and Dodd watched the ponies ; and Primrose Horn watched them from horseback at hand.

The Bailiff of the Duchy drank no beer. When time for refreshment came, he was content with a bottle of lemonade. Many regarded his impassive brown face and dark eyes ; none knew what opinions the man might be entertaining or what projects took shape within the hidden places of his mind. Silence was his secret of power. He rarely committed himself to any expression of opinion or definite promise.

There were no fines to be levied on the occasion of this drift, and the business, so to call it, quickly ended. Then horn mugs appeared and the company congregated in hale comradeship and good humour. Wolferstan was popular and received many friendly greetings. As Portreeve of the Bridgetstowe Commons, he played his part. The Bailiff shook his hand and saw in him a fellow-official.

Then stood up Abel Pierce, grim and dogged, beside the beer barrel and waited for a chance to speak. Ilet Yelland was something of a heroine on this occasion, and but for the cloud at her heart, had felt a proud woman. For Dodd introduced her to certain farmers' wives and to various smart farmers' daughters on horseback, including Miss Horn. Primrose shook hands genially and spoke softly, while she bent forward, stroked her horse's neck and fixed her fearless grey eyes upon the dark ones of Ilet. Without appearing so to do, she estimated every point and perfection of the other's mind and body. She read the brown, bright face, listened to the slow voice, marked the scanty

vocabulary and saw a woman of one idea—fervent, humble, noble, and probably narrow. The scrutiny helped her on her way. They went aside together, and Primrose praised Wolferstan delicately. For some time they conversed, but were just about to part, when a noise of anger at the beer-barrel turned their eyes in that direction.

Pierce's opportunity had come. His enemy was drinking and had clinked his horn mug with many friends. Now he saw Abel and, exhibiting just a shadow of patronage, held out his half-empty horn.

"No, thank you," said the other, loud and clear. "I ban't drinking with you, Portreeve. I ain't forgot Minnie Masters yet."

Dodd's face blazed into hot crimson, but he spoke quietly.

"Have you been asleep then? That lie's laid this two year an' more. All the world knowed 'twas false—all but you, seemingly. Be careful of your speech, my son, else you'll get into trouble."

"I ban't your son. Your son was drawed out of Bude Canal along with his mother. An' you can take back your lie, for I tell truth and many honest folk know 'tis truth!"

There was a murmur and some men intervened. Old Perryman spoke to Pierce.

"You drunken fool! What spleen be this? Go away and blush for yourself—to bring up that story."

"Let the man stop," cried Wolferstan. "Let him stop—drunk or sober—till he's called back afore this company what he's said afore it! That dirty, wicked scandal never was believed by any living soul who knew me."

"All the same, where there's smoke there's fire," said a big voice from horseback.

Wolferstan turned and saw Slanning close at hand. He and one or two other young men were smiling together, and the Portreeve looked upon them with astonishment. His self-control disappeared and he began to grow excited. Round him were many faces, some amused, some merely interested, some angry on his behalf. Voices broke out, but he could not listen. Standing apart, he saw Ilet beside Primrose Horn.

"No smoke without fire—no smoke without fire!" shouted Slanning again; then he laughed mightily.

"And no lie without an evil heart behind it," answered Wolferstan. "This man brings a charge that is dead and buried."

"The woman and her child are dead and buried—not the charge apparently," said a horseman. He was a stranger to all parties present, and was ~~merely~~ amused at the quarrel.

"'Tis a lie," answered the Portreeve—"a black, damnable lie, and I'll leave it at that. None on God's earth can whisper one foul word against me, or my dealings with man or woman; and for this cur—why he's done it I don't know; but the answer I do know."

Dodd walked up to Pierce and those who stood between them fell away. It was a personal difference and nobody felt any obligation seriously to interfere.

Abel did not flinch and did not rage; he stood looking squarely at the angry man, and kept his hands in his pockets.

"Why for shouldn't I give you a hiding, you evil-speaking toad? To stand here afore this rally of neighbours and spit out this lie——"

"If 'tis a lie, I'll let you flay the skin off my bones," said Pierce calmly. "I ban't feared of your noise. Truth's truth, an' truth will come to light. Who ruined Minnie Masters, if you didn't? If 'tis a lie, then she went to face her God wi' a lie on her lips, for her old mother will swear that she accused you the night afore she drowned herself. Bluster an' swear and swing your whip, an' thrust yourself among your betters. But prove I'm a liar—that's what you've got to do. Then smite—not sooner."

Wolferstan stared almost helplessly round about him.

"Who believes this?" he cried.

"I don't!"

The Bailiff of the Duchy spoke in tones deliberate and calm.

"I do!" said Orlando. "The man's guilty—look at him!"

Men growled and argued and took sides upon it. Abel Pierce still stood with his hands in his pockets and his eyes on Wolferstan's agitated countenance. There was a movement in the crowd where people pressed to the centre of excitement.

One heavy thought struck the Portreeve and he wondered why Hlet stood aloof. At this cruel crisis she did not come. Anger broke loose in him—wrath at the dark, insolent face beside him.

Ilet was now approaching as swiftly as she could make way through the crowd, but he did not know it.

"Believe it the cowards and curs who will!" he shouted. Then he turned on Pierce.

"There's my payment for your villainy—the only payment it's worth, you foul-minded wretch!"

His hunting-crop screeched and the heavy cane struck Abel across the cheek.

The sufferer gloried in this sudden, burning pang. For him no shame came with it. He put his hands to his face, and two men sprang forward and kept Dodd from repeating the blow.

A babel broke out among the spectators. The horses had scarcely made more noise.

Slanning roared the rest down.

"Guilty! Guilty! You with the raw face there, why don't you hit him back?"

The Duchy Bailiff had elbowed his way to Wolferstan's side and now spoke in a voice that was almost a command.

"Get on your horse and ride away—quick! 'Tis ill answering lies with blows, but you've done it now."

"An' right to do it," cried another. "So would I, or any man."

"Blows ban't proof of innocence, nevertheless," argued a third.

Ilet had reached her lover's side, but he pushed her away with the rest and got quickly to his horse. Many voices babbled; many differences of opinion were expressed; a farmer uttered the general decision.

"'Tis for this chap to prove Portreeve guilty, if he can, not for Portreeve to trouble about it," he said. "Let him as brings this charge make it good, an' be damned to him!"

A policeman appeared and took Wolferstan's name and address. Then the parties broke away into two camps, and some stood round Pierce, and some followed Dodd to his horse. A dozen minor quarrels sprang up, and two men came to blows on their own account in the corner of the pound. Primrose insulted Mr. Slanning when he returned to her side, and the youth rode wretchedly home alone; for she refused his escort, called him 'a noisy coward' in the hearing of half a dozen soldiers from the artillery camp, and then turned her back on him.

Two hours later she met the wounded Pierce on Fordsland

Ledge in secret. A deep purple wale, fading to livid white, scored his cheek, and he knew that it was payment well earned ; but she encouraged him stoutly.

"'Tis very well, but she'll never forgive me," he said. "I saw her face as I came away. There was everlasting hate on it."

"Rubbish ! Only in your eyes it looked so. Nothing's everlasting. You did splendidly. What's a bruise to winning her ? She's the sort to stick in one place only. Get her away, and the rest will be easy. The countryside is full of this now. She'll have to ask him if 'tis true."

"The old woman's ready to swear against him that his name was the last on her daughter's lips."

"The seed's sown then. Let it take root and sprout. You'll marry her, if you play your cards right. As for him——"

She broke off and rode away.

And elsewhere, stunned by the event of the morning, Wolferstan, for the first time in his life, felt what it was to have enemies.

Bitterly he mourned the day's doings ; bitterly he resented the evil fable now revived against his good name ; but, before all else, he deplored two things : that Ilet had not hastened to his side and held his hand against Pierce, and that he had lost his temper, fallen into a rage and put himself in the wrong by a brutal blow on a man unarmed. He had never dreamed of this possibility in himself—this unreasoning, headlong rage. But the temptation to assault a fellow-man had not offered until that moment. For a time Wolferstan despaired of himself ; then calmer thoughts came, and he braced his mind to action. Yet chaos rode homeward with him. The word 'enemies' filled his brain. He considered what course to take and where to seek counsel. His first idea was to rush to Ilet. But shame of himself and something very like impatience with her apparent passivity, turned his ideas into another channel. Next he cast about for a friend who might teach him how to proceed in the difficulty thus wickedly thrust upon him. Once he thought of going to see Alexander Horn, and once he was in a mind to speak to Primrose. Next his intention turned to the vicar of the parish church ; but his mood tended not that way. Finally he determined to see Dicky Barkell, who had some credit for sense.

Until the night came he sat listlessly alone in his house, or moved about in his garden. Every window that looked down upon it seemed to his imagination shining with censorious eyes. Into the dark he went at last, and night came as a friend.

"Enemies—enemies," he said again and again to himself as he moved along.

CHAPTER VIII

ADVICE

MANY people in many places held animated converse over the strife between Pierce and Wolferstan; and those most vitally involved both erred in their conduct upon the night following the pony-drift. But it was the mistake of one that led to the error of the other. Ilet expected Wolferstan, and even went a little way towards his home to meet him. He did not come, and she turned restlessly away to the Moor. Anon, she found herself in Oke valley, and then, pushed by some sudden impulse, stopped at Fishcombe Cottage and spoke with her Aunt Henny. Abel Pierce left his home and set out for Okehampton as she approached. Ilet saw him go; otherwise she had not entered.

Elsewhere the Portreeve climbed to the dwelling of his friend, Dicky Barkell, in hope that the signalman might prove a valuable counsellor.

Richard and his father were at their supper before he came, and old Abner had detailed the catastrophe at Halstock Pound with his usual picturesque but scanty vocabulary. Dicky declared the incident unfortunate but not surprising.

"Always the way if a man gets his head over the crowd," he said. "Rise up above your fellows by the height of an eyebrow, and they'll be like so many wolves to tear you down again. Once down, they'll be friendly; and once up beyond their reach, they'll be quite content to lick your boots; but 'tis while you're fighting to rise. Let one big-souled, generous man give you a pat on the back, and there'll spring up a dozen envious little curs to say you haven't earned it. 'Tis the last snap of their teeth afore you get beyond the reach of 'em for ever. Then they'll creep back to kennel, and the next generation of 'em will fawn on you. I've waited to see Wolferstan's enemies show themselves. 'Twas time they did. If a man wants to get in front, he must remember the drawback of enemies. I'm one

who wouldn't think the game worth the candle myself. Better to keep below every man's envy, and not let 'em know you're worth envying—same as you an' me."

"Just what you can't do when courting's the matter," declared Abner. "That is, unless you choose a very homely piece without a market. But a splendid maiden like Ilet Yelland—wonder is there wasn't more after her. There was bound to be a row when she cooled off to Pierce."

Dicky nodded and lighted his pipe.

"Amazing to me: to fight to get married! I'd fight to escape from it," he said.

"Beauty's a bar to a female in my opinion," continued Abner. "When I was looking round, I turned from the bowerly girls; because they pretty women always think that to be pretty is enough."

"So it is—up to the point of catching a husband," declared the signalman.

"Ess fay—but the others look deeper. 'Tis generally allowed by sensible females, that more goes to marriage than a man. The plain girls know they must make up for a round shape and red lips an' gert eyes; an' the wise ones can do it by use of the intellects."

"I've marked that myself," said Dicky.

"It is so. Your mother—to say it lovingly—was not a woman as anybody looked round after; but what a masterpiece in a kitchen! I shall always mourn your dear mother—as long as you do the cooking, Richard. As for Wolferstan—these here perfect chaps—I don't mean I *believe* it—yet—when you get men as teach in the Sunday-school and go from strength to strength by day, there's often a night side to 'em."

"I'm surprised at you! After a good supper, too, to speak so uncharitable," said Dicky. "Keep out of it," he continued, "same as I mean to do."

"Portreeve will have to prove Pierce be a liar, according to Farmer Hext an' a few other men: while according to Ned Perryman, an' the Bailiff, an' old Westaway, 'tis for Pierce to make good his charge if he can. So it lies," explained Mr. Barkell; then he suddenly exploded in a weak and rheumy chuckle. "Lord! to see the way Miss Horn from Bowden jumped on Miller Slanning's son! He was against Dodd, an' she called him a noisy coward and turned her back upon him."

He stood glazing out at the world like a pig just stuck ; but he held his glass in his eye firmly through it all."

Dicky smiled. "I can see him," he said.

"All the women will be against Wolferstan as a general thing," continued Abner.

"Not they !" answered his son. "They pull faces in company ; but if you could see in their hearts, you'd find 'em perfectly contented. The ruin of one woman's a left-handed compliment to 'em all. Childer got wrong side the blanket are a walking, living advertisement to their power over us. Wherever was the sensible woman as wouldn't marry a proper man because her sex had been too much for him afore he met her? Ban't likely. There's dozens of well-thought-upon, worthy people as would have ten wives to-morrow if the law allowed it. An' 'tis the men as make the laws, mind, an' always will ; so, with that amorous spirit in the land, the women——"

"Stop !" said Abner, lifting up his long clay pipe in a threatening attitude. "Where you get your loose opinions, dash my wig if I know. 'Tis certain they never comed from me, an' I won't hear 'em. A joke's a joke, but when you talk of ten wives, you'm breaking all bounds of decency. There's some women yet in the land as would rather bide maids than marry a bad chap ; an' Ilet Yelland's one of 'em. I had speech with her back-along after the pony-drift. An' she was in a very poor way. It knocked the heart out of her when Dodd lost his temper and scat t'other across the face. 'Twas not like the Portreeve to do it', she said."

"Not like one side of the man she knows ; but 'twas perfectly like another side of him—must have been, else he couldn't have done it."

"Of course she don't believe it—not if angels said it she wouldn't do so," continued the old man.

"Was she in a great flare with Abel Pierce?"

"She was not," admitted Mr. Barkell. "Women's that interesting and astonishing. To my surprise, she was not. She reckons there's another in this and that Pierce has been told a lie and deceived."

The man in their thoughts knocked at the door, and Abner opened to him. Old Barkell, seeing the visitor, let Dodd in and then walked out himself. He guessed that Wolferstan had come

to visit Richard, and so, mumbling something about the viaduct, got his hat and went into the air.

The Portreeve came swiftly to his business.

"You'll guess why I'm here," he said.

"I'm terrible sorry to hear what happened. Light your pipe an' take a chair."

"Will you deny I had every provocation? As a man suddenly faced with a wicked lie—afore the world assembled, so to say. What would you have done?"

Dicky mended the fire and decided not to answer the question.

"I'm rather sorry you looked me up to-night, and I'll tell you why," he said. "You understand my way. This is a bad business, but it's not my business; an' not by one word am I going to make it so. I know you both and you're both my friends."

"No friend of his can be mine—not after this morning."

"There it is! I'm sorry to the heart for the day's work. But not a word more than that shall I say to either of you. As to advice—I've never known a friendship bettered by giving it, and no man I care about ever had mine, or ever will. When you an' me want to quarrel, then I'll begin offering advice—not sooner."

"No man can believe Pierce and remain my friend."

"If that's so, you're answered, for I *am* your friend, and I always hope to be."

Wolferstan now sat down and stared into the fire.

"You're different to most—that's why I came to you," he said. "You never get hot over anything, and don't take sides. All the same, ban't what I call friendship."

"Tis the best I can do, as the crab-apple said when the boy bit it and made a face."

"A crab you are: sharp, but sound at the core, I suppose. At least advise me this—where to go for wisdom. I'm at a ticklish pass for the minute. I never knowed I should ever come to seek an opinion outside myself so much as I do this night."

Richard smoked quietly.

"Tis breaking my own rule to say it. Still, since you ask. . . . If I was in your fix, I'd go to Ilet Yelland afore anybody else in the world."

"What's the sense of that? My good's her good; my evil's her evil. The part can't heal the whole. How can she help? I had thought to find her at my side when that knave lifted his

voice against me and the world turned upside down. Her place was surely there ; but she kept away for some reason."

"Father says she tried to come at you, but couldn't for the crowd that hemmed you round. Besides, how could you expect a maiden to push forward among all they men? If she'd took your whip, I lay you'd have used your fist."

"That's not the least part of my trouble—that I lost my temper—I that thought I'd tamed my temper to stand anything, like a man trains a dog."

"Temper's a cat, not a dog. 'Tis never broke in really. They tiger-tamers generally get unpleasantly surprised sooner or late an' so do you hopeful chaps that think you've got yourselves in hand. Let the right moment come and the beast will out."

"I wish to God she'd not gone to the drift."

"So do she. My father walked back with her. You go to her, old chap; tell her the—; but here am I doing just what I swore not to!"

"'Tell her the truth', you were going to say. And don't she know the truth? Don't she know me to my heart? If not—then 'tis a poor case."

"Don't lose your nerve about it."

"I'll go to no man, nor woman neither, Dick: I'll go to my God with this, and only Him."

"I should try her first," said Richard dryly. "Ban't the time to keep away from her."

"Thank you—you mean well in a worldly sense. But I ought to have looked to my conscience sooner—then I shouldn't have come here. I must make no mistake now. I must ask where there's an answer ready for all that ask."

"So you believe, I know. Perhaps 'twill be the same answer as I have given you."

The men rose and went to the door. It was at such moments that Wolferstan found his friend unsatisfying, for Barkell belonged to a growing order and stood for that sceptic spirit now awake and alive in his class, thanks to education and the beginnings of scientific training. He suspected the vitality of the old order and resented all interference with liberty of thought.

Outside, old Barkell smoked his pipe and looked at the viaduct, where it loomed huge across the dark valley.

"Good night, father," said Dodd. "I hope you're not thinking the worse of me for what happened up-along."

"I hope not; I hope I'm a man with large opinions, Portreeve. This here gert bridge, which be my special care an' which I've seen grow to fulness, like a father sees his child—it do teach a man to take large opinions an' throws light on life. 'Tis almost a religious thing in its way, I do assure 'e."

"'Tis a faithful thing, faithfully put together, no doubt."

"More than that! When I see them three mighty piers of steel springing aloft, I do think of Father, Son an' Ghost—Three in One, an' One in Three. For what would one be without t'others? But together they hold up the Bridge of Life, same as these here hold up the railway."

"A proper thought. All parts of one great contrivance," admitted Wolferstan. "A man must take 'em all in all to get the full blessing of 'em."

"All—or none," answered the younger Barkell. "But there's more railroads than one to Plymouth; an' more highroads than one to goodness."

"You'll live to speak otherwise," answered the Portreeve shortly. "There's only one true way that leads there."

Then he left them and set off homewards.

The road he took led beside Oke, and, at Fishcombe Cottage, he hesitated and looked at the lonely light in the valley. But he went upon his way, and presently, above Sourton village, saw the colony of earth-born stars that twinkled there and indicated the hamlet. He thought of Barkell's advice and his own resolve. Then he walked forward along the Moor edge and communed with religious thoughts.

The nightly darkness of Dartmoor swelled southward and sank in featureless ridges of gloom: while above it the sky presented another space of profound obscurity; but between the two was light where a waning moon sailed low above the horizon and fretted the clouds around her. The wind blew strongly and the planet seemed to plunge through the midst of a driving sea of ebony and silver mingled. Ragged vapours, touched with pearly spindrift, rolled about her; and now they gulped the semicircle of cold light, and now they scattered before it, as the foam before the prow. Then a cloud-rift widened and the hills and valleys of the sky were touched to their depths with radiance; but those of earth remained darkling.

CHAPTER IX

'ASK PIERCE'

ILET YELLAND won small comfort from her conversation with Abel's mother. The old woman was in a rage, and her bitterness had obscured her judgment. Her son's raw face had entirely altered her opinion. She felt astonished to see her niece, but welcomed the opportunity and lost no time in forwarding the interest of Abel.

"Poor chap—if he don't lose his eye 'twill be by the mercy of God. A guilty conscience often wakes the devil where you'd never think he was sleeping; an' so it did do this day."

"He's not guilty," said Ilet, "an' well Abel knows it."

"I'd have said the same, an' did say the same a while agone. I believed in the man till this. But now—no. Take care you never put yourself under his heel, or 'twill be the worse for you. Abel's right, an' he've only voiced what others think—voiced it out of love for you—to save you. He's took his poor face to the chemist—though I doubt his eye's touched—a cruel sight—as if a tiger had clawed him."

"What could a man do, suddenly faced with this wicked lie? Abel's ears have been abused. I'll never forgive him, for he knew Dodd, an' well he knew Dodd couldn't have done it. Who knows the truth of Wolferstan like what I do?"

"I tell you he did do it—else he'd never have answered it so."

"'Tis just how your son would have answered it himself, I reckon; or any other man worth calling a man. Dodd! Why, he's told me all about himself—all—all from the day he went frightening crows. All—all his hopes and fears and deeds, past and future. Was there any room in his life for ruining a woman? No, I tell you—nought but hard work from morning till night—always—Sunday too. Never such a man for work. Pure as me, I'll take my oath of it!"

One of Henny's slow smiles worked up to her face.

"You'll know more about 'em one day. There's some sort of work they'm never too busy for. Told all! So we think—generation after generation of us; an' they laugh. As likely we should tell 'em our maiden thoughts, as they should let out their bachelor deeds. Ban't nature. You take a larger view of men folk, Ilet, an' let him see you have. If you must have him—more fool you—be sensible, an' don't let him laugh at your blindness. Take him with your eyes open—not shut. Then he'll respect you and look to leading a clean life. Yes, I believe it now; an' other neighbours too. I could say more when my heart thinks on my son. The patience of him—to suffer that bad man's scourge for you."

"'Twas not my fault," she said sulkily.

"Nor yet his. Truth's truth; an' for love of you he told it—had to tell it—not for hate of the man. He's no hate against Wolferstan: but your happiness be all the world to him. He'd die for 'e."

"Abel's put himself in reach of the law, they say at Sourton."

"Very like. Ban't law-breaking to ruin a fool of a girl, if she's wife-old; but 'tis law-breaking to throw it in the face of a rascal afterwards. My son's not afeared. He hopes an' prays that Portreeve *will* have the law of him. Two can play at that."

"I'll never believe it—never. If Wolferstan said 'twas true, I'd not believe it."

"Well, you're a pattern of woman different to me. When a female takes a man with her eyes shut, 'tis a sort of marriage as breeds more'n children. Ruin your life, if you like."

"I'm a growed woman—not a girl. I can judge as well as you or anybody else," she answered with temper.

"I wish you could, Ilet," said Mrs. Pierce. "For your own sake I wish you could see that this hookem-snivey man, with his fair face an' dark story, ban't worthy to hold a candle to my Abel, with his dark face an' honest heart. Better go now, for us shan't get to see alike to-night. We've been good friends since you comed amongst us; an' long may we bide so. I'm sorry to my innermost core for 'e; an' I'll say no more."

"You needn't be that," answered the other stoutly. "Afore long, truth will out, an' you'll know I'm right, and your son wickedly wrong."

“Tis only wasting words to hope so. Good night, my dear.”

And while Dodd Wolferstan walked on the Moor and made a long round to Bridgetstowe; Ilet, not a mile distant, returned dispirited and weary homeward.

She asked whether her lover had been to see her, heard that he had not, and then went to her room. Through sleepless hours the charge against Wolferstan sank into a lesser thing than his absence after it. Time magnified this into a mountain of wrong. By what possible right had he kept away? For what possible reason? If he called for comfort, who had such power to bestow it and pour it upon him as she? And if he stood in need of no gentle voice to come between him and the memory of Abel Pierce’s hard one, then, surely, he might have thought for her and all that this incident must mean from her point of view.

It had not, indeed, burst upon Ilet with the horror of complete surprise; but Dodd was unaware of that, since she had never breathed a word of Abel’s dark hints. So far, therefore, as Wolferstan could know, she had heard the charge against him for the first time that day. How had he met it? Very properly by chastising the liar before those who had heard him lie. For that she did not blame him. And then he had pushed her away when she approached, and disappeared. This action she found it impossible to forgive. His absence now did much to unsettle her, because she could not understand it and had no suspicion that he too felt a grievance. Between snatches of sleep, she lived again through the scene of the pony-drift, heard the laughter of men, and neighing of horses, the uplifted voice and the thud of the blow on her cousin’s cheek.

She rose very early and told herself that she would not see Wolferstan for a week, until her ideas were orderly and her mind clear. Then she changed her intention and decided to see him at the earliest possible opportunity. She was glad to plunge into the business of another day. She forgave him and trusted him, and doubted not that he would swiftly make all plain.

They met indeed, even sooner than Ilet hoped; but the interview fell out at a place and in a manner far different from her expectation.

It happened that Mrs. Horn wanted the character of a Sourton girl new to service, and old Susan Yelland, a familiar intelligencer

of the district, had been appealed to. But Mrs. Yelland was no penman, and now sent a message to Bowden by her niece. Thus it happened that chance took Ilet to the farm at an unfortunate moment, and the accident, better than a month of plotting, fell in with the plans of Primrose and advanced her intrigue.

The first person whom Ilet met as she walked up the drive to Bowden, was Abel Pierce. He worked on a field that spread to the right of the way, and was engaged in scattering manure upon the grass-lands. A long strip of plaster stretched down the side of his face. The man took no notice of her, but she stopped and accosted him.

"Be your eye darkened?" she asked.

"'Tis nought," he answered. "I don't care if it goes, so long as you are all right. Let him prove I'm a liar, and he can put his foot on my neck if he pleases."

"It was an evil thing to tell it out afore the world—a cruel, wicked thing. If he hadn't struck you, I should have, if I could have got to you."

"'Twas to save you."

"I'll never forgive you, Abel."

"I'd never want you to if I lied; but if 'tis truth—what then? What has he said to you? How has he proved he was innocent? Tell me that."

"I haven't seen him since."

"Haven't seen him!"

"An' shan't mention the subject when I do. I feel as I felt when first you spoke against him. I scorn it."

"Haven't seen him! Well, go up to the house, an' you will see him."

"Is he there?"

"Talking to Miss Horn at the door. Maybe she can give him wiser advice at this pinch than you can."

"What's his business here?"

"Better ax him. They've been telling together half an hour, anyway, for I watched 'em from t'other end of the field."

She went on her way. Then, before this new seed could germinate, Wolferstan appeared, riding briskly along the road.

"I was coming to you now," he said, as though divining her thought.

“Why for didn’t you come yesternight?”

He dismounted and stood beside her with his horse’s bridle rein through his arm.

“I was ashamed to, Ilet dearest,” he said quietly. His voice sounded softer than hers, which was high-pitched.

“Shamed of what then?”

“Ashamed of losing my temper afore the world—and you.”

She stared.

“There be times when a man ought to lose his temper, I should think. You might have been ashamed if you hadn’t.”

He shook his head.

“That’s all wrong. I’m a Christian man, and I’m playing a big game in the world. Religion and sense both were against me. If I can’t govern myself better than that, how be I going to get to the top?”

His propriety irritated Ilet more than anger could have done. She kept a moody silence and stood with her eyes on him.

“You don’t want my pity then,” she said.

“I want your forgiveness. I’ve had your pity—I know that.”

“You want me to forgive you for thrashing a man as told a wicked lie against you?”

“That’s not the way to put it. Be fair, Ilet. My thorn’s my temper, and I thought I’d got it under. It’s hurt me cruel to find what I am—after all.”

“I wouldn’t have forgiven you if you hadn’t beaten him. ’Twas the right thing to do.”

“You must feel different to that, if we are to get on in the world. All high doing be built on self-control in the doer. ’Tis out of sight; but you’ll find it at the foundation of every big man.”

“I wonder you don’t go across to that chap spreading muck in the field, and tell him you’re sorry then.”

“No need to sneer at me, Ilet. Very likely I shall tell him so. It’s clear his ear’s abused. He’s heard this thing and jumped at it to gain his own ends.”

“Like a lot more seemingly. ’Tis for you to make ’em come to your feet, not to go whimpering to theirs, surely.”

“Very high-spirited of you; but there’s a right way and a wrong. We must be patient.”

“You choose a queer time for patience, if you ax me.”

He suppressed a flash of annoyance.

"You're angry I didn't come to you yesterday ; and to tell truth, I was a thought angry you didn't come to me at the drift."

"I did—an' you pushed me away as if I was dirt."

"I hoped you would have come quicker ; but of course you couldn't—not through that crowd. So let that pass. I ought to have come to you last night, and you're right to be vexed with me for not coming."

"But you can come here. Yesterday my heart was aching for you. I wanted to be standing up for you and taking my share of the trouble as became me. Didn't I smart too? Didn't I feel every word he spoke? Did I sleep easy last night? Didn't I roam half way to Bridgetstowe counting to see you at every step? You shut me out of your life last night—at the most terrible moment you've ever faced. That's what I can't forget. And now you're up here."

"We're coming to the truth at last," he answered. "I made a mistake—granted. All the same, you ought to have known me well enough to have trusted me through it."

"What do I know, an' what don't I know? I know this : that you was coming to me after talking for an hour with another woman."

He started in astonishment.

"Clouds—clouds blowing up from all four quarters at once," he said, half to himself. "'Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.' What of that? What of Miss Horn? I came on business to her father and he was out ; so she saw me instead. *You* to say such things !"

"You've been axing her how to get out of this mess, I suppose—her an' not me?"

The man flushed up, remembered his recent resolutions, cooled and sighed.

"This is worse—far worse than yesterday," he answered sorrowfully. "D'you want me to wish I'd never seen you, Ilet?"

"Better for me, perhaps. Anyway, hear this : you told me I was half yourself, and I'm content with no less than that. The man I marry shan't lead a life I don't share. I'll have all of him, or none. If there's another woman that he can go to in the first fix—let him ; an' let him stop with her."

"You can say these things?"

“Who wouldn’t? To come to me from her! She’s told ’e to be patient and forgive everybody and ax everybody to forgive you. What for? For Christianity, no doubt. An’ I—an’ I tell you to——”

“Don’t,” he said. “I’m no coward, if that’s what you mean, and well you know it.”

“The religion’s a coward that makes you beg pardon of liars. An’ I won’t marry a man who’s gwaine to cringe to the world an’ climb by crawling.”

“You’re not asked to plan my life, Ilet; you’re asked to share it.”

“I won’t share it if I despise it. You may have all the vartues in the Bible, but you’ve none for me if—— And the high place you’ll get to I’ve no wish to share, if ’tis to be reached by licking people’s boots an’ taking the opinion of rich farmers’ darters!”

“You’ll do well to mind your own business, and let me mind mine, I think.”

“You say that—a dirty thing like that to the woman you want to marry! Ban’t your business mine? Am I the sort to sit outside my man’s life, an’ be no more part of it than the post of his garden gate?”

“I don’t know what you are,” he said, his own temper wavering, as the light in his eye revealed. “You’re a very unreasonable sort seemingly.”

A pause fell between them and in the interval came great cawing of rooks where they lumbered about in the mess that Pierce was scattering upon the meadow.

Suddenly Ilet spoke and poured her anger into one bitter question. Her temper had got beyond control and she clenched her fist like a man.

“Be it true or ban’t it—what Abel Pierce said? Perhaps, though so unreasonable, I’m in reason to ax that.”

Then real anger woke in him also.

“You raise that evil question—you can dare? You, that trusted me like the sun to light to-morrow—or pretended you did. You, that have talked nought but pure love to me! You that said—out on you, Ilet!”

She remembered all that Henny had spoken the night before.

“You’re only a man, I suppose—not a winged angel. Men

He suppressed a flash of annoyance.

"You're angry I didn't come to you yesterday; and to tell truth, I was a thought angry you didn't come to me at the drift."

"I did—an' you pushed me away as if I was dirt."

"I hoped you would have come quicker; but of course you couldn't—not through that crowd. So let that pass. I ought to have come to you last night, and you're right to be vexed with me for not coming."

"But you can come here. Yesterday my heart was aching for you. I wanted to be standing up for you and taking my share of the trouble as became me. Didn't I smart too? Didn't I feel every word he spoke? Did I sleep easy last night? Didn't I roam half way to Bridgetstowe counting to see you at every step? You shut me out of your life last night—at the most terrible moment you've ever faced. That's what I can't forget. And now you're up here."

"We're coming to the truth at last," he answered. "I made a mistake—granted. All the same, you ought to have known me well enough to have trusted me through it."

"What do I know, an' what don't I know? I know this: that you was coming to me after talking for an hour with another woman."

He started in astonishment.

"Clouds—clouds blowing up from all four quarters at once," he said, half to himself. "'Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.' What of that? What of Miss Horn? I came on business to her father and he was out; so she saw me instead. *You* to say such things!"

"You've been axing her how to get out of this mess, I suppose—her an' not me?"

The man flushed up, remembered his recent resolutions, cooled and sighed.

"This is worse—far worse than yesterday," he answered sorrowfully. "D'you want me to wish I'd never seen you, Ilet?"

"Better for me, perhaps. Anyway, hear this: you told me I was half yourself, and I'm content with no less than that. The man I marry shan't lead a life I don't share. I'll have all of him, or none. If there's another woman that he can go to in the first fix—let him; an' let him stop with her."

"You can say these things?"

“Who wouldn’t? To come to me from her! She’s told ’e to be patient and forgive everybody and ax everybody to forgive you. What for? For Christianity, no doubt. An’ I—an’ I tell you to——”

“Don’t,” he said. “I’m no coward, if that’s what you mean, and well you know it.”

“The religion’s a coward that makes you beg pardon of liars. An’ I won’t marry a man who’s gwaine to cringe to the world an’ climb by crawling.”

“You’re not asked to plan my life, Ilet; you’re asked to share it.”

“I won’t share it if I despise it. You may have all the vartues in the Bible, but you’ve none for me if—— And the high place you’ll get to I’ve no wish to share, if ’tis to be reached by licking people’s boots an’ taking the opinion of rich farmers’ darters!”

“You’ll do well to mind your own business, and let me mind mine, I think.”

“You say that—a dirty thing like that to the woman you want to marry! Ban’t your business mine? Am I the sort to sit outside my man’s life, an’ be no more part of it than the post of his garden gate?”

“I don’t know what you are,” he said, his own temper wavering, as the light in his eye revealed. “You’re a very unreasonable sort seemingly.”

A pause fell between them and in the interval came great cawing of rooks where they lumbered about in the mess that Pierce was scattering upon the meadow.

Suddenly Ilet spoke and poured her anger into one bitter question. Her temper had got beyond control and she clenched her fist like a man.

“Be it true or ban’t it—what Abel Pierce said? Perhaps, though so unreasonable, I’m in reason to ax that.”

Then real anger woke in him also.

“You raise that evil question—you can dare? You, that trusted me like the sun to light to-morrow—or pretended you did. You, that have talked nought but pure love to me! You that said—out on you, Ilet!”

She remèbered all that Henny had spoken the night before.

“You’re only a man, I suppose—not a winged angel. Men

have ruined women, I believe, an' kept their mouths shut about it. I only want you to understand I'm a growed woman, not a know-nought fool to take on trust all a man in love may say in a hot minute. Anyway I'll thank you to answer."

"I'll not answer! If you can ask, I'll not answer! I've answered the world that asked. Those that knew me never did --my betters--parson--gentlefolk--a score. They never asked, because they knew the answer. Those mean hearts that ask ban't worth answering."

She flamed under her brown skin and was a little frightened at his furious face.

"Think what you're doing," she said.

"Ban't worth answering," he repeated, and his voice throbbed with passion. "You met me in an hour when I was contrite for sin, when I was looking to my God to help me; when I was feeling a hard, cruel, unmerited disgrace; an'--an' you ask me this. Ask Abel Pierce for your answer. I've done with you!"

He mounted immediately and galloped off, while she stood and stared after him. Her errand was absolutely forgotten, and now, suddenly turning back, Het went slowly homeward.

CHAPTER X

THE COMFORTER

NIGHT and prayer had brought peace to the Portreeve, and with morning there had come stout resolves to do his duty. It was not by intention that he met and spoke with Miss Horn. Business took him to Bowden, and he arrived there to find Alexander Horn had broken an appointment owing to the sudden arrival by post of affairs more pressing. The farmer was gone to Exeter, and his daughter carried messages to Wolferstan when he arrived.

But, their business over, Primrose knew how to keep him. For a few moments conversation turned to private matters, and, seeing at a glance Dodd's attitude to his wrongs, she tuned herself to the same note. He was in a patient and religious frame of mind, and she pretended to the like. She bitterly scorned the accusation, but affected no astonishment, and told him, as Barkell had already told him, that enemies were a part of man's inevitable lot. She congratulated him on his regrets and restored self-control, and said that it was religion made alive. Upon this highly correct attitude Het's more defiant and natural mien had come with painful force. At another time her just wrath had possibly comforted Wolferstan not a little; but, for the present, a rather unctuous patience ruled him. His own loss of temper begot this frame of mind, and it was perfectly genuine.

The comment of the world assisted to compose him. Few could discuss with patience the old charge revived; and since it came from a rejected suitor, the folly and falsity alike were accentuated. Keen expression of regret and sympathy greeted Dodd; yet even in his satisfaction at this widespread commiseration, the Portreeve felt some measure of concern, for the reason that it was so universal. The scene at the drift had been generally reported. All men appeared to have heard of it; and while not

a few were actively angry for Wolferstan, he knew not what larger number might be indifferent, or how many others held an opinion adverse from him.

Upon this situation had come the rupture with Ilet, and his misery increased from day to day. Twice he called to see her and twice she refused to see him. A week passed; then, between intervals of work, he went up to Bowden again, and again saw the daughter of the house.

To his surprise she was able to tell him more about his sweetheart than he had learned elsewhere; but Ilet did not come first in their discourse. Primrose was full of congratulations, because his honey had taken a county prize at Plymouth, and a mare, with feet at foot, exhibited at the local agricultural show, had also won first honours.

"I scored a triumph, too," she said. "My dear old 'Childe the Hunter' won again in his class."

"Did you ride him yourself?"

"Of course! D'you think I'd let anybody else?"

"I've been so occupied——"

"We all wished that you had showed yourself as well as your mare. You ought to have been in the ring. It is a mistake to let people think you care a button for this business."

"It's not the lie—it's my girl."

"Ilet—if I may call her so. Ilet Yelland? But surely! You mean she is feeling this bitterly and doesn't like you to be away from her?"

Dodd reflected. He perceived that under the present delicate conditions, it might be well to say as little as possible to anybody and keep his tribulations to himself. Moreover, the man in him indicated such a course. But Primrose was not like a stranger. He kept silent now and the woman spoke again, softly and warmly.

"Dear Mr. Wolferstan, she mustn't be down-hearted. Let her take a lesson from me, if she will. I've never lost an opportunity to kill this lie. I've killed it with laughter and scorn. Can those who know you for one instant believe folly so transparently wicked? Your life is the answer. She must champion you with laughter. She must not hide herself and her tears. She must be with you always. It was to separate her from your side that this thing was done. Can't she see that? There's nothing to cry about. 'To

cry about'! Rather let her thank God on her knees for such a man! And let her be thankful, too, that she has a chance to show the stuff she's made of."

Her voice shook a little, and Wolferstan gazed at the hand she had laid impulsively on his sleeve.

"Thank you," he said. "I wish Ilet—"

"Tell her from me to be brave, and remember that all the world thinks as she thinks in this matter. It always makes us brave when we have the world on our side. But I think I should be braver still myself if I had the world against me."

The man could not be blind to her enthusiasm.

"Few women are so plucky as you. You're like your father. Nought shakes you, if you honour a man by thinking well of him. My Ilet haven't known me so long as you have. Her own cousin says this, and there's more behind, if we could only find what. Pierce has given out that that poor dead girl's mother will swear she accused me the very day she drowned herself."

"The graver the charge, the prouder she must be to sweep it away—Ilet."

"Trust you to know a woman! At any rate a good one. I'll wager that 'tis even thus my Ilet's thinking and doing. I must see her—and yet, you see, I must be just. This has come as a terrible shock upon her. Her mind moves slower than yours, because, of course, she's not had the advantages of education that you have."

Primrose nodded thoughtfully. Then she risked a bold sentiment.

"Sometimes I wish you'd not married out of your own station, Dodd."

The subtlety of the compliment pleased him unconsciously.

"Not that. She's far above me—such steadfastness and humbleness—such a one-thoughted woman as she is."

"But there's a danger with one-thoughted people, as you call them. They see a thing clear enough, but they don't see it whole—like we see the moon. Yet, though not always wise, that way is wise enough over this wretched affair. All of us are one-thoughted in this."

"I'll see Ilet to-night," he answered with great determination. "I'll put it before her as you see it. Not that there's any need; still, I'll tell her how it is with——"

"Not with me. Speak generally. Treat the thing lightly. Beg her not to be too serious. Why, what madness and moonshine—worse than Jack o' Lantern in a bog! *You* to dishonour any man or woman either!"

"She'll think the like for certain."

"Of course she will—she must. Why not go to her at once? You can. I let I mean. She's here this morning with a message for my mother."

The Portreeve started and grew very red. He tugged his moustache and stared uneasily round, as though he expected actually to see his sweetheart. He exhibited this uneasiness, because he believed that if Ilet saw him talking with Miss Horn, she would probably pass by without acknowledging his existence. The position was delicate, for he had naturally been loyal to his betrothed and given Primrose no hint that relations were strained between them.

While he hesitated she spoke again.

"I'll see her if you like. That's a generous offer—more generous than you can guess."

She laughed lightly, that the words should carry just their proper significance and no more.

"It is good of you to suggest it," he said; "but no—out of the question. I'll speak about it to-night—not now. In fact, I must hurry up at once. I've business in Okehampton to-day."

They stood near Bowden gate; and now, looking up the long drive, Primrose saw Ilet Yelland returning from the house. The message that she had forgotten some days before was just delivered in response to a second letter from Mrs. Horn.

Dodd prepared to depart.

"To-night," he repeated; "not before. Don't say you've been talking to me, if you please. She's in a very excited and agitated frame of mind, naturally enough, and not quite herself. Thank you for all you've said to me. I value it. Good-bye."

His leave-taking was extremely hurried, and without difficulty the woman perceived that Dodd had no wish to meet his sweetheart then or there.

"Tell her to keep a brave heart and be worthy of you!" she cried after him; and presently she turned to meet Ilet.

Wolferstan had expressly asked her not to mention him. Therefore she designed to make the advancing woman take the

initiative if possible. She hoped that Ilet had seen her lover depart, but this was not the case.

The younger gave a slight gesture of recognition and was hastening by, when Primrose came to her side and extended her hand quickly. She smiled and did not speak until a warm pressure had been planted on Ilet's palm.

"I'm so glad to meet you, Miss Yelland. I've wanted to see you again ever since we first met. I don't really think you've been out of my thoughts once."

She angled to ascertain how Ilet stood to the tragedy, because a vagueness in the Portreeve's voice and words had convinced her that he was evading the truth. As for the younger woman, a strong dislike towards Primrose had ruled her mind; but it was based on nothing substantial. Her jealousy had cooled, for, with thought, came the conviction that it was folly. A sense of indifference and loneliness filled her life. She only waited for Wolferstan to come again to see her. At this moment she felt too forlorn to fight.

"Thank you, I'm sure—you mean the trouble at the drift 'Twill come right."

"Men are what we make them, Ilet—if I may call you 'Ilet'."

The sentiment had no apparent point, but was spoken with an object.

"I suppose they are, miss—unless men are what they make themselves. Anyway 'tis so with my man. 'My man' I say, but——"

"Very, very few people believe it. It will be forgotten in a month or two. The trial is really a blessing in disguise for you, because men who love us like to see if we are strong enough to stick to them in trouble as well as prosperity."

"'Tis a very serious matter."

"You think that because you have seen so little of the world yet. In such a man as Mr. Wolferstan it is nothing at all. If it was even true, a real woman's love wouldn't flicker at it—at any rate not a wise woman's."

"'True'?"

"Men are what we make them," said Primrose again. "If a girl's a fool, there's always a man in reach to prove her one. Men are silly children where we are concerned. If we offer sugar-plums to children, do we blame them for picking them

up? What should we think of a child that didn't—or a man that didn't? You're not going to marry a sanctimonious prig, and I don't suppose you want to. Don't let this incident waste a moment of your thoughts. You couldn't if you really loved him."

"'Tis because I really love him that it do."

"He's denied it, hasn't he? Then surely there's an end of the matter."

A searching and intense look came into Ilet's eyes. She was wondering whether she could trust this woman, and feeling with all her heart that she could not. She yearned indeed for a confidante; she stood in need of advice; the folly of her denial of Wolferstan was not hidden from her; yet she had so far miserably persisted. Now there came a sudden longing to see him.

The unhappy lover in her desired to confess to Primrose and hear the other chide her folly; but the woman in her kept her dumb. Soon she felt thankful that she had not spoken; for Miss Horn now tried another line by which, if possible, to learn a little more.

"Your silence shows me that you are not quite satisfied with his denial," she said, meeting Ilet's straight glance with one as steady. "That's madness, Ilet—it is indeed. Listen to me—I who have known him so much—not better—but so much longer than you have. Don't be too hard on him, whatever you think. To doubt his word—I tell you again it is madness. Whether he speaks the truth or not, his word must always be the trumpet of truth to you—if you want to live a happy woman."

"What advice be that! So well tell me to put out my eyes that I may see nought ugly no more, or stop my ears—or—I'm not a fool. 'Tis only right an' just that he should——"

She broke off again, suddenly overcome by caution.

"I know you mean kindly to me, and I thank you, miss; 'twill come right, no doubt."

"There's every doubt, my dear Ilet. I can see the doubt in your eyes and hear it in your voice. You have made me very sad—sad, because I'm so powerless. You're such a fortunate girl, if you could only see it."

The other bristled with suspicion instantly.

"Has he asked you to speak to me?"

"No; indeed he asked me not to do so. But I do believe he's very miserable."

"Not my fault."

"I'm sure of it. 'Tis his own sensitive nature. He didn't tell me that you were—what I find. You've told me that yourself. That's why I'm sad. If you can't fight the world for him and help to roll away these dark clouds that are crowding down upon him and—and—so on, who can?"

"What can I do?"

"Well, in the first place, be a little selfish and see how silly you are, from the standpoint of your own prosperity. Think of being his wife—the social meaning of it alone."

"Don't say things like that! What d'you think I be made of? Do trash like that count against——? There, I'll go; we'm long ways off from thinking alike, if you can speak so foolish as that."

"I merely wanted to remind you of what you've utterly forgotten: that you're a very fortunate woman."

Primrose harped on this, finding that no argument could better answer her purpose, and worse meet Ilet's case.

"Why, you'll rise—Heaven knows how high. To sulk over this, like a child! For it is childish—and dangerous too. The man's not made of patience—no man is. Take my advice: forget Minnie Masters, and go to him as his future wife should do, and ask him to forgive you for not coming quicker. Do that; or I shall seriously doubt if you are quite worthy of him."

Ilet stared at this startling counsel.

"What's this you be saying to me?" she asked almost helplessly. "You—you! Who are you to say such things—or me to bide and listen to 'em? How can the likes of you——?"

"I'm interested."

"So I see. Interested to do what?"

"To make you friends again, I imagine. What other interest can I possibly have? D'you doubt me too? I only want to comfort you."

The other gasped.

"I be going daft, I think," she said. "Better you'd took his advice anyway, and not spoke to me."

"That's true—if I haven't made you a thought more sensible. Yet, think quietly and calmly of what I've said, and you'll see

how well meant was every word. I'm a little older than you and better know the dangers and temptations of the world. Try and be wise ; that's all ; try very hard to be wise, Ilet Yelland, before it's too late."

Primrose turned away a few paces ; then she stopped and came back again.

"Remember I am not prejudiced—only deeply interested in the future of Mr. Wolferstan—as so many are. If I can believe him—surely you—good-bye !"

She broke off and went homeward ; while Ilet, with a sort of congested pressure of brain, stood for the moment powerless to formulate a clear pathway through this thicket of ideas now spread before her. One obvious fact at least appeared : the Portreeve had again seen and spoken with Miss Horn.

That night Wolferstan called once more upon his sweetheart : and he was very urgent, because business immediately took him away to North Devon. But she refused to see him.

CHAPTER XI

TWO LETTERS

ABEL PIERCE was working at the great stone quarry that gapes in the hill near Meldon Viaduct, and it happened that, returning to Okehampton on a mineral wagon, he met Dicky Barkell, who had seized the opportunity to travel to the station in the same manner. Pierce, though he held the signalman's opinions of little practical value in the affairs of life, yet respected his wits and now asked him a question or two.

"I know you try to be friends with all," he said; "so I suppose you know Het Yelland have thrown Wolferstan over? At least I fancy so."

"Better leave that. You've fancied a good deal too much lately."

"There's no fancy about one thing. The man ruined that poor damned girl; an' now——"

"Drop it. I won't hear. You come very badly out of this."

"What do I care so long as I get her?"

"He's a long way straighter man than you, and you know it."

"Straight or crooked—wait till you're after a woman."

Dicky, with his usual love for generalities and his unmoral indifference to actions, began to speculate.

"We'm compounded—like doctor's caucheries,"* he said.

"I mean our characters. Love of females is in you; an' love of childer; but love of plain dealing ban't. You was bound to do a bit of harm if the world crossed you."

"Words do fall out of you like feathers off a goose!"

"That's my nature—that's how I'm compounded," said the other. "I love to read wisdom and spit it out again."

* *Caucheries*—medicine.

"The question in my mind—but there, why should I tell you? But this I'll tell you—Dodd Wolferstan won't have her now."

"Maybe she weren't worth having. He'd make a better husband than ever you would."

"You think so."

"I know so. That man's idea of love would be a comfortable house wi' a tweeny-maid to help his wife, and smart clothes for her. Yours would be to make her the mother of an army of children and chance the rest."

"You preach like a Gospeller."

"Not me—too large-minded, I hope. I wouldn't like to make my living driving souls. All for liberty of mind I am. I want to live in a world where there's nought to stop men doing good and everything to stop 'em doing evil. That's not the church people's way, worse luck. They are trying to hide the truth, like sailors pour out oil to still the sea. Truth's too rough for their leaky tub. In my world, you and such as you wouldn't be able to carry on with your lies a week."

"You'll be so like to go to hell for your devilish opinions as me for my deeds. Only you'll have had nought for 'em; I shall get my reward where I want it—in this world. Next don't matter."

"They'm throwing hell over now, so Wolferstan tells me," answered Barkell. "Though 'tis an ungrateful part in the parsons. Hell have been a very good friend to them—made 'em, you might say."

"Like a newspaper 'tis to hark to you. An' here's a bit of news for yours. 'Twas that I meant to tell you. There's no call to pity Wolferstan no more. He's not sorry for this at heart. He don't want her now—not since he's had such a deal of comfort to Bowden. Het's seen that clear enough, whatever else she didn't see. Wonder wa she didn't sooner. That farmer's darter be fifty times more to him than ever Het was. Portreeve's gone away now, to let the thing cool off, no doubt."

"You're a venomous toad, Pierce," said Dicky without emotion. "A very dangerous, headlong man. You'd better have a care—else you'll end your days in clink yet. Talk about conscience!"

"I'll live my life out anyhow. I'd sooner be a maggots in

a pear than you. All the same, maggots often have a rough awakening. You may find everything worth anything in the world rolled up in one woman's clothes yourself some day."

"'Twould be a rough awakening, certainly," admitted Dicky; then the truck stood still and they parted.

The next morning, while Pierce continued to wonder whether the hour was ripe for approaching Ilet, there came to him a letter; and by the same post she also received one. They were from the man who filled both their minds.

Wolferstan was glad to escape for a moment from the immediate atmosphere of his home. He had entered on a little tour in North Cornwall for the Beekeepers' Association; and while by day he visited hives and improved the local knowledge of scientific apiary, he had much leisure at night to consider his own affairs.

After Ilet's third refusal, the Portreeve fell back upon himself and fought his battle alone. It was not true that he had again gone to Bowden; but Pierce only obeyed orders when he spoke vaguely of repeated visits there. Wolferstan had sought and gleaned help at the highest source he knew. He had taken his faith and his trusting heart to his God, and found an answer there. To him, at this stage of his career, religion was a large part of life—no mere outward adornment to be paraded in public, with a view to increasing credit in pious circles—but a live, necessary and precious thing. It belonged to him as an intrinsic ingredient of character; and whether experience of life would shake it, or lessen its vitality, only life could show. The real beauty and the real power proper to faith were a little understood and a great deal unconsciously displayed in practice by him. The man, in no vain phrase, was a servant of his Master—a working Christian and a believer in the dogmas and directions of his creed. The Protestant Church owned no spirit more steadfast; could boast no disciple who trusted and obeyed her more thoroughly than Dodd Wolferstan. To waver or seek a new thing had never occurred to him. Dicky Barkell's sceptic attitude was not understood by him, and he felt no sympathy with it. The circumstance sometimes puzzled him, sometimes angered him. They rarely argued, since the Portreeve had no logic. He merely lived in hope respecting his friend, and used

the earnest Christian's familiar formula when faced with an infidel but otherwise respectable fellow-being.

He often said—

“You will know better some day.”

Whereupon the railway-man always made one answer—

“I want nothing better than to know better.”

The Portreeve's love increased rather than waned under his denial. One thing at least he learned during these days: that to live without Ilet would be a hard and a cruel matter. He suffered much and deeply, while she continued to pay his unconscious errors by refusal to see him. Her attitude was now largely the result of misrepresentation. His anger and refusal to answer the charge against him were as nothing; for that rebuke she knew she had deserved; but now she believed that he was constantly at Bowden, and the fact had gone far honestly to lessen her devotion. So long as he visited Primrose Horn at noon, she was determined that he should not see her at night.

Then there came to Wolferstan, as he imagined, an answer to his prayers for guidance; and it entered his mind to write letters both to Ilet and to Pierce.

These words reached the woman, and, after hesitation, she read them:—

“STRATTON,

“N. CORNWALL.

“MY DEAR ILET,

“As you won't see me, I can only hope you will be gentler with a letter and at least read it. I have had little on my mind since that sad day when we quarrelled but sorrow for my wrongdoing. Things had fretted me badly and, somehow, when I found you could ask me in cold blood if I'd ruined a woman, it made me rage. But I was very wrong not to keep my temper and answer you quietly. I ask you to forgive me for saying harsh and unkind things to you, and I swear before God my Maker that I never touched that poor girl, Minnie Masters. I only knew her to give her 'good day' when we met; and long, long ago when an evil rumour joined my name to hers after her death, I showed in the light to all men that the thing was impossible. All who knew me, knew it was impossible without my showing. I say to you, Ilet, that if this was the last word I should ever write, I am innocent before God and man both. And if I'd had ten thousand more temptations than ever I did have, they would

have been nothing to a man like me. Would any man with my opinions and hopes for the future go out of his way to wreck everything at the start by fouling his good name and ruining his career that way?

"I can't say no more except that without you, my life will be a half-finished thing and a sad business at best. Don't let their evil speaking keep you away from me, dear Ilet. If there's anything still said against me that I don't know about, tell me what it is, and I'll explain everything and never blame you again for asking.

"I have written to Abel Pierce, and I know by now you've changed your mind about wanting me to be angry with him any more. What's the good of that? I want to help the man to be wiser. You can see my letter to him if you like.

"If you won't marry me, Ilet, I must live my life without you; but I can't think 'tis so bad as that between us. But if you will, and if you have forgiven me, please to meet me on Saturday next up to Yes Tor. I've a feeling to meet you there, where first I asked you to take me, and where you said 'yes' so sweet, with nought between us and heaven. If the day's fair I'll be up there by noon. Come, Ilet, for my days are empty and my heart is very heavy.

"Your own affectionate lover,

"DODD WOLFERSTAN."

To Abel Pierce the Portreeve wrote thus :—

"STRATTON,

"N. CORNWALL.

"DEAR MR. PIERCE,

"This comes to tell you that I am very sorry I struck you before the people at Halstock Pound a while back, and I hope you'll forgive my foolish anger and passion. By this time I trust that you have found out that the thing you said against me was an old, false fable with no shadow of truth to it, and that you were wickedly misinformed, and that those who so wickedly misinformed you ought not to be trusted in anything.

"Knowing what love of woman is, I can understand while you believed this lie you were tempted to use it against me; and that you even believed it yourself, because you wished to do so. But it was an evil weapon to use against any man, and I hope the trouble and mischief you've made will be a lesson to you.

"I've wrote to Ilet and asked her to meet me and make it up, for though the lie was a cruel one, yet I had no right to lose my

temper and fall into a rage with her or with you. I won't believe you brought this up against me single-handed, but if you did, I pray to God your heart will be touched to confess it to Him, and to ask Him to pardon you. And if I've got any other unknown enemy that helped you out of his evil heart against me and tried to ruin me with Ilet and with the world, then you may tell him what I tell you: that I forgive him for his wickedness, as I hope to be forgiven myself.

"If my girl comes to me, as full sure I think she will, that ends it: if she does not, then the crime is on your shoulders, and you'll suffer your reward as sure as there's a just and watchful God in Heaven.

"Good-bye, and again I ask your pardon for losing my self-control against you, and if I can do you good at any time to show I'm a contrite man, I will do it.

"Yours faithfully,

"DODD WOLFERSTAN."

In neither letter did he make any allusion to Primrose Horn, for he had not the least notion that her name and his were being echoed together in abused ears.

CHAPTER XII

ABEL'S COURAGE IS REVIVED

THE effect of Wolferstan's letter on Abel Pierce was very marked. The labourer felt staggered for a moment by these simple sentences and the straightforward allusions to higher powers. He found himself puzzled and almost weak. First he thought of showing his mother the letter; but he hesitated. Shame kept him waking; then he turned from it as a slight to Ilet and his love for her.

During several days he did nothing, and hoped that time would deaden his emotions. He wondered how Ilet felt towards her letter, and became troubled because she had not mentioned it to him. Mrs. Pierce, however, spoke of it, and, indeed, had seen it. But he would not hear of the matter from her, until one evening when she made him discuss the subject and told him her own opinions. Henny had not named the Portreeve out of loyalty to her son, but of late many had mentioned him to her, and Dodd's letter to Ilet was the last and strongest argument in his favour. The old woman now knew that Abel had terribly erred; and fearlessly she taxed him with his error.

"Light your pipe and bide at home to-night and listen to me," she said. "Abel, my dear, you can't do no more in this. He's honest. He's called God A'mighty to witness it."

"What then? So do every rogue. When they'm in a corner, they call that Witness—because they know He won't answer the call."

"His letter is a Christian's letter. There's a great power of patience in it. He's cruel sorry he lost his temper against you. But he's wrote to you too—though you never told me he had. Abel, you must meet the man and own to your mistake."

"Easy to say that. Why d'you believe him so sudden?"

"Let me see your letter."

"'Tis like the rest of him—smug and false, no doubt. All part of his game."

"Let me see it then. You needn't fear me. You know your good be my life. He's nought to me; but right is everything. 'Tis for your good I'm thinking. You've hearkened to a lie and you must hearken no more. The man's innocent."

"Because he says so."

"Because no guilty man could have wrote as he done to Ilet."

Abel produced the letter from his breast pocket. It was already much worn at the folds.

"You've read it often enough, I see," said his mother.

"I know it by heart, for that matter."

Henny put on her spectacles and slowly studied Wolferstan's communication, while her son stared darkly into the fire.

"No man ever wrote fairer words to his fellow-man than that," said Mrs. Pierce presently. Then she folded up the letter quietly and returned it.

"He've won you over with all his psalm-smiting."

"And you too. Don't deny it. Don't I know your every look an' turn? Ban't you miserable to the heart's core? An' ban't you right to be? We mustn't fight against the Lord. You've got to lose her an' come back to peace gradual. If you take her now, there'll be no more peace, an' the hand of Heaven lifted against you. This letter—there's truth in it—every word; and you know it, else you wouldn't have read it again and again till 'twas in tatters."

"Go on—go on! I'm to throw up my life's hope for a letter an' believe my enemy's pen an' ink stuff against my own knowledge? Never, I won't!"

"Don't roar, my dear. 'Tis no argument to shout. You *know* I'm right; an' he's right. What you've got against him be a flimsy falsehood in the honest light of day."

"You've been listening to other people—instead of me."

"I've heard others tell about it. They marvel to hear such things vomited up against the man. I took your side while I could do it. But now I know 'twas a terrible mistake; and Ilet or no Ilet, 'tis your duty to your soul to confess it."

"My soul's nought to me, nor my body neither, without her."

"Don't say that. Life with a female's only a matter of years.

Your soul's a matter of eternity. There's no husbands an' wives in Heaven. They'm an earthly contrivance. 'Tis the Almighty's way to let love of women breed agony here for His own wise ends. Think of the happiness of Heaven. If us can be sure of happiness there——"

"Eternity without her! What's that but hell?"

"I can't argue with you, my dear. But I can only ax God on my knees to show you where you'm so terrible wrong. An' as for her an' Portreeve, it's got to be, whether you will or not, for he's axed her to meet him up 'pon top o' Yes Tor, Saturday noon."

"An' her?"

"She's going, I believe."

"All's up, then."

"'Tis the triumph of right."

"I don't want to hear none of that rot. 'Tis only your view of right, anyhow; an' you'm so often wrong as anybody else."

Yet, despite his harsh words, he was at that moment nearest yielding. Another idea occurred to him.

"What about the man's goings-on with Primrose Horn?"

"That's the only thing between them now, I believe. She means to ax him to explain all about that."

"An' if he can't do?"

"Maybe there's nothing to say. Him an' Miss Horn was always friends in seemly bounds, and Ilet knowed it."

The matter dropped. The man mumbled a regret that he had spoken unkindly, and his mother kissed him. Then he went to his bed and thought of what to do. More from the difficulty of proceeding than from the right and justice of not doing so, he came reluctantly to feel that he would take no further action. Then Primrose Horn occurred to him, and he asked himself how she was likely to view this determination. He felt that she must know it; and, even while he decided to tell her, there rose in his mind a half hope that she might turn him again. His trust in her increased as the night waned. Hounds met next day near Bridgetstowe, and he knew where he might catch her on the road.

He left his home at dawn before his mother was waking, and duly fell in with Primrose Horn where he expected to do so. She rode alone and, seeing him, stopped.

"Things have happened," he said. "I must speak to you, please, miss. I won't keep you long."

On the right of the path were fir-woods and the trees hung over the way, where red-barked stems towered above a soft carpet of dead foliage.

Miss Horn turned off here and walked beside him, invisible from the high road. Then, where undergrowth of laurel and Pontic rhododendron grew, she dismounted.

"What has happened?" she asked calmly.

"Wolferstan is back."

"I know that. He dines at Bowden on Sunday."

"'Tis what he'll do on Saturday. He've writ long letters to me an' Het. My mother have heard his letter to her, an' he've told her to meet him come midday Saturday on Yes Tor. Here's his letter to me. 'Tis strong. The people are on his side too. I don't see what good it is my going on—unless. Ban't no use fighting the world so well as the man. So I'm in a mind to throw up the sponge—or else lie behind a hedge for the man and finish him. But I reckon that wouldn't suit you."

She was reading Dodd's letter and not listening to Pierce. Now, still reading, she held up her hand for silence.

"Walk 'Childe' about in the hollow out of sight from the road," she said. "Leave me alone for a bit."

Abel obeyed and tramped backwards and forwards with her horse, while she perused the letter. For nearly twenty minutes afterwards she remained sitting on a tree-stump without speaking or looking off the ground. Then she rose, hitched up her habit and beckoned to Pierce.

"What have you got to answer to this stuff?" she asked.

"What can I answer? People believe him. The thing has failed. I must chuck it up, I suppose."

"'Chuck it up'—just as the woman's going to give in to you."

"Not at all. I told you half an hour ago she's going up to meet him Saturday. He'll soon come round her again now she's promised to see him."

Primrose thoughtfully stroked her horse's nose.

"I've made enough enemies as it is," he continued. "What's the good of falling out with the world, if I can't have her?"

"You don't deserve the woman—though she was almost ready to fall into your arms. It's got to be now, whether you like it or

not. Other people are interested as well as you. What's the sense of showing the white feather now? That's the way to make people see you're a rascal."

"She's going to meet him on Yes Tor on Saturday anyhow."

"My name has not been mentioned?"

"Not by him. Ilet's full enough of it, for that matter. She's going to ask him straight why for he went to you in his trouble instead of to her."

"I shall ride and see Mr. Wolferstan this minute. Let Ilet know we've met again."

"She'll see him if she's said so. Fate's against us."

"Fates aren't ready-made, you silly fool. We make our own. Your fate is to marry Ilet Yelland. We've got to do a few rather abrupt things, and that ends it. How does Ilet stand to you?"

"She's terrible miserable."

"Suppose she waits hour after hour up there and he does not come?"

"He will come."

"Not if I say 'no'."

"You! You're not strong enough for that."

"What I do will prevent it—not what I say. If you were to go to Ilet Yelland instead of him, and tell her that he was not coming, and that you had seen him going the other way with me."

"I've lied enough, I tell you."

"You'll not lie. D'you think I've been with him fifty times and left him the same man to her? I know him better far than he knows himself—if you can understand that. Take the horse again and let me think."

For nearly half an hour he walked the hunter up and down. Then she called him to her.

"I can stop this," she said. "He'll go up by the Moor gate nigh Bridgetstowe station. She'll be on foot, so he'll walk too—that's certain."

"No doubt at all."

She stroked the horse's nose again and the beast bared its teeth and lovingly nibbled at her little hand. Sunlight came through the trees, and beech leaves, still clinging, made a flame of red colour behind her where she stood.

"You know the road that turns up under the railway arch?"

"Yes; that'll be his way."

"There's a hedge to the left where a man might lie and watch the road and anything on it. That's all I ask you to do. Then, when you've seen what you will see, you can go to Ilet and tell her—part of it."

"You'll be there then?"

"Yes. All you've got to do is to go up to Ilet and tell her that you've seen Wolferstan with his arms round me. That'll be true enough, anyway."

"By God! You'd let him!"

She laughed.

"His humanity I count upon, not his——. Go to the bridge now. I'll show you the ground. There will be a catastrophe of some sort, and he'll come in the nick of time to—do something."

"What's the good of that? Even if you stop him going to her, he'll explain it afterwards."

She showed impatience.

"What a poor thing you are! Can't you see the rest remains with you? If you were worth your salt, you'd take very good care that it was too late to explain it afterwards. Isn't she sick already of his explanations and all the rest of it? If we could change places and I was you, I'd have my banns up next Sunday. Carry her by storm! Let yourself go! What the deuce are you frightened of? What is your life good for without her? Tell her the thing is in your hands, and that he's faithless, and that she *shall* marry you. Master her!"

He nodded and took a long breath.

"Be foolish for yourself, if you like, but you've got to be wise for me first. Perhaps when you meet her, after she's waited there for the man two or three hours, she'll think better of it and find herself ready to listen. Any fool could do your part; the hard part is mine."

"If a woman can do such things for a man, I suppose a man——?"

"Could do as much for a woman. I should think so—if he *was* a man. That letter! To let that shake you! Why, he's playing with you—laughing at you. At the bottom of his heart he wants me. At the top of his heart he thinks he wants Ilet.

But it's all folly. There must come some definite thing to open his eyes. And so there shall. After Saturday he'll know he loves me—as well as I know it already. But that's all too deep for you. Now get across to the railway bridge as quick as you can, and I'll wait for you there. Go to the gate and see there's nobody in the road before I ride out of this wood."

An hour later they met at a spot where a track climbed up out of the country beneath, passed under the railway and ascended into the Moor. It branched at this point, and one arm bent leftward to the Sourton Tors, while the other proceeded to the south.

Abel studied the part he was to play and discovered a hiding-place in the hedge from which he might see without being seen.

"You've only got to think of something that would bring you here naturally on Saturday and the rest is straightforward," she said; "now I'm going to call on Mr. Wolferstan at Bridgetstowe."

Into her quick mind had entered a project. It was violent, but she did not shrink from it. She was far less positive of her position than she had led her accomplice to suppose; but love of incident as much as love of the man tempted her forward. She had thought of a way to stop him on his road to the Moor, and the means to carry out her intention had dimly flashed upon her.

Presently she saw Wolferstan for a few moments at his door, and found him cheerful and hopeful. But he did not speak of his forthcoming meeting with Het. Indeed, he avoided personal matters.

As for Pierce, Miss Horn's words had answered their purpose with him. His ferocity awoke. A great indifference as to the future made him better able to play his part in the present. He called upon his aunt, Susan Yelland, that night, and contrived to let Het know that the Portreeve's first act on returning home had been to visit Bowden.

CHAPTER XIII

DEATH OF 'BROWN BOY'

PRIMROSE HORN was acutely alive to the fact that no small thing would keep Wolferstan from his tryst on Yes Tor. When they met at Bridgestowe he had been full of apparent contentment and she had guessed the reason why. She enveloped him, as usual, in the gentle and genial atmosphere of her own great regard for him; and this atmosphere with customary skill she regulated; made more dense when he was preoccupied, and lightened when he had most leisure of mind to perceive it.

Two days remained in which to make her preparations. She understood that a wide patience must mark her future attitude; but the immediate problem was simple: to keep Wolferstan and Het apart until the latter's patience became exhausted and she found herself without courage to fight Abel Pierce further. Let her be removed safely out of his life, and Primrose felt confident that time would bring Wolferstan to her. But it might be a considerable time. For the moment it was necessary to prevent the Portreeve from going to Yes Tor at the appointed hour. The crude outline of her action had presented itself in the wood while she spoke with Abel Pierce. Now she set to work to fill in the details. The main scheme was simple enough in its reckless violence, though some subtleties branched from it. Primrose wondered if she could with safety speak to Het before the meeting on the Moor, but she abandoned the idea, and it was accident not design that actually brought them together on the day.

The morning dawned too bright, and the south already spoke of rain, while the sky was clear and the earth brilliant with

low sunshine and a glitter of frost. Two men and two women regarded that uncertain dawn with interest, and all four understood how largely the day must bulk upon their lives. Two were working together; two acted independently and expected presently to meet on the secret mountain-top of Yes Tor, hidden from every eye but that of the winter sun.

Primrose Horn left her home soon after ten o'clock. She drove an old trap and an old pony, and her object as understood at Bowden was one of charity. A venerable couple lived on the Moor edge five miles from Bridgetstowe railway station. The man had worked at Bowden in bygone days, and hearing now that these people were suffering under the pinch of the season, Miss Horn decided to comfort them. She set forth with a basket of good things, some woollen garments from her mother, and from her father a half-crown piece. The road was rough and in parts scarcely defined. Therefore she took a worthless vehicle. The aged pony that drew it had also seen his best days and was seldom put to work. Primrose, however, preserved him out of consideration for his honourable and extended career. She always hated to destroy a horse.

"'Tis a risk," said the stableman at Bowden. "'The axle's very near through. You didn't ought to drive it, miss—specially up over."

But Primrose knew all about the axle and went her way.

The road led through Sourton and, just beyond that village, the pony overtook Ilet, and its driver stopped, bent down and shook hands effusively.

"Good morning!" she said. "I'm so glad it's fine. And I'm glad to meet you. Are you going my way, or do you turn off at 'Twin Tree' stile to the Moor? But I know you do!"

The other's dark face, placid till then, clouded as she met the smiling woman's eyes.

Ilet was clad in home-wrought garments of a brown fabric; Primrose wore a tailor-made costume of green cloth, and she had a boa round her neck of light, bright fur, that was only a little darker than her hair.

The walker carried a stout stick and a basket which contained food. She was taking some luncheon for Dodd also—a large, savoury pasty which she had herself cooked for him. Now she became painfully conscious that Primrose smiled at her

preparations. She moved her basket nervously from hand to hand while the other spoke to her.

"I do hope it's going to be fine. You are off to Yes Tor—am I right?"

The other's face burned. For one moment a flood of passionate words leapt to her throat and nearly choked her. Then she partly mastered herself.

"Go—go away—and keep away if you can," she burst out.

"Why—whatever——!" cried the charioteer.

But she spoke to air, for Ilet Yelland had turned back. Not until Primrose, with a world of wonder on her lovely face, trotted forward again, did Dodd's sweetheart pursue her own road. Then, over the stile called 'Twin Tree,' she climbed and set her face to the Moor.

She was desperate and sore driven. After having speech with Primrose, Abel gave his cousin but little peace. Especially he had made her understand that Wolferstan and Miss Horn were meeting constantly since the Portreeve's return home. Her heart grew very cold before this news, and more than once she determined with herself not to climb Yes Tor at his call. Yet, after much fret of spirit, she decided to do so. The end she knew not; she only knew that she had forgiven him entirely the lesser matter of his anger, and that with her whole soul she believed him guiltless of the deed imputed to him; but a mightier difficulty stood between them now. After long battles with her jealousy she conquered it to the extent of keeping the appointment that he had made for her. Then, as unkind chance decreed, even upon the way to him, Primrose had appeared. It was not the meeting that now darkened Ilet's spirit, but the vile fact that the other knew all about her business and the rendezvous with Dodd. This, naturally, she had set to his account, and it terribly hurt her. She herself had shown Wolferstan's letter to her aunts and taken their opinion upon it; but she found it hard to forgive him for mentioning his proposition to others; and Primrose Horn last of all. Once or twice reason struggled with her and she remembered her aunt's opinion: that probably Dodd regarded Primrose as a sister in this matter. But the idea brought no comfort to her, and in sorrow and distress of soul she climbed to the heights. As she tramped over sombre miles of the country moor, she rehearsed speeches and questions that

should strike at this problem from divers points of view and set it at rest for ever.

She looked at a little watch that he had given her and believed that within an hour they must meet. Then she reflected that Primrose might very possibly fall in with the Portreeve upon his way. From that to the conviction that she designed to do so was but a step.

"Afore God 'tis the last chance as I'll give him," she thought with suffering. "I'm here at his will, an' if he don't come to me with a clean breast from all these dealings with that grinning devil, I'll drop him for evermore."

And while she tramped upon her way, the tenderness in her stricken harshly by this meeting, Primrose, well pleased at such an unexpected incident, went forward until she reached the lonely junction of roads where her part was to be played. She passed under the railway bridge, satisfied herself that no eye was upon her, and made swift preparations. One thing only remained to do, and she waited for Abel Pierce to do it. He arrived presently and then, taking a file from the trap, she showed him where to work. In two minutes, with a few touches, he had reduced the cracked axle to a dangerous pitch. Now it needed only another jolt to break it altogether. The lady then directed Abel to get out of sight and keep out of sight.

"Something is going to happen as soon as he comes," she said calmly, as she flung the file away into a ditch by the roadside. "All you've got to do is to witness it. Then go straight to Yes Tor and, after Ilet Yelland is weary of waiting, you can approach her and tell her—not the truth altogether, but a part of it. I should think she'll be satisfied if you say you came round the corner of that bridge and saw me in his arms. What really happens we must try and keep from her for a time. Be a man for once and have the banns up on Sunday."

Pierce now dimly suspected what was coming.

"Don't kill yourself, that's all," he said.

"Whatever happens, you need not come to help him. See what you're bidden to see: only that; then go unseen yourself."

He disappeared into hiding and she waited with glances cast behind her.

Twenty minutes passed. A train ran by, but Primrose drove under the railway bridge so that no passenger might chance to

observe her. The old pony strained forward to drag a mouthful from the hedge. Then Wolferstan approached swiftly. Miss Horn saw him, leapt into her vehicle, whipped up 'Brown Boy,' took him round the corner, and sent him straight over the edge of the road into a water-table that extended beside it. The fall was a foot, and the concussion broke the axle, brought down the pony and threw Primrose on top of him. She had partly jumped, partly fallen forward, and as she came down, a buckle cut her chin to the bone. She felt the hot blood and smiled.

When Wolferstan turned the corner thirty seconds later, he found the trap smashed, the pony screaming with a broken fore-leg, and the woman face down in the ditch bleeding freely from her face and apparently dead.

He was swift and resolute. For a moment, indeed, despair touched him when he recollected how far he stood from every sort of help, but he set to work with a will, drew Primrose from the wreck, propped her against a bank and attempted to restore her.

She fell forward in a limp, unconscious heap, and the Portreeve's arm went round her. Then the unseen watcher understood and went his way. It would now be exceedingly easy for him to lie like truth.

As for Primrose Horn, the glory of the moment fired her and she played her part as well as it could be played. She was proud, even at that moment, of her acting, and sorry none would ever know and admire such skill. But the world is full of high histrionism known only to the performers—the superb art that conceals art from all but the artist.

Yet, while never losing touch of the impersonation, she rose somewhat above theatricals also; for the blood on her face, his arm round her, and the shrill agony of the pony, wrought upon her; and nature, in shape of a shadowed hysteria, crowned the masterpiece. She was never really unconscious, but simulated that state until the man began to fear for her life. He knew nothing as to what he should do. Once or twice he ran a little way. Then he came back, soaked his handkerchief in the ditch and held it to her forehead. When he left her side, she rolled inert; therefore he kept his arm round her.

At last she let herself open her eyes, but suffered no speculation to light them. She had decided exactly what words to say

at this point, and now, in a voice as faint as the last whisper of the dying, she spoke, but showed no sign that she knew whether man or woman attended her.

"All's dark! Open my dress. . . . I can't breathe!"

The words came like a sigh of wind along some winter heath. They were faint and clear. Then her consciousness appeared to flutter out again, and her head fell forward.

With clumsy fingers he obeyed her; and his common sense proceeded to do more. Her stays were tight, but Dodd had heard of laces being cut at such times, and now, finding that he could not get to the sufferer's back, proceeded to unfasten her corset without hesitation. Then he looked anxiously to see if any good came of it.

She seemed to breathe more easily, and he felt her limpness slowly stiffening. Again her grey eyes opened; but the lids lifted only a fraction over them.

"My heart—feel my heart! It's stopping!" she said in stronger tones. Then she drooped again.

He was flustered now, and, forgetting her pulse, obeyed literally. He felt the round, warm globe of her left breast under his hand; and he felt her heart beating hard.

"Thank God! Thank God!" he said. "You're better, Primrose. It's all right. Your heart is going like mad!"

"It's Dodd—dear Dodd!" she cried, and her eyes opened widely with a sudden flood of returned consciousness and recognition. He was drawing his hand away, but she put both hers over it and held it tightly.

"Don't move yet! Don't move! You've saved my life."

Her emotion continued to help her art. She abandoned herself to a great outburst of tears, let herself go utterly, clung to him, kissed his sleeve, and saw the blood from her chin dabble his coat and waistcoat. The man—now satisfied that she was not fatally hurt—began to grow embarrassed.

"Cheer up, cheer up!" he said. "Don't cry any more 'Twill only weaken you. Let me stanch this blood. It's a properly bad cut; but it'll be all right. Are you hurt anywhere? Can you move?"

Still clinging to him, she attempted to rise. Then she fell back with a little scream.

"My ankle!" she said.

Her bosom rose and fell after the storm. He saw her suddenly appear to realize the disorder of her dress and try in vain with shaking fingers to fasten it. Then he moved a little from her side and made attempt to calm her mind.

"Don't go away! Don't go away!" she cried to him.

"No, no, I'm not going. I'll just leave you to. . . . Your poor pony—poor old 'Brown Boy.' He's done for. He must be shot. His right fore-leg's horribly smashed."

She wept anew to hear this sorrowful tale, and it was long before she would suffer him to leave her or go for necessary help. At last he prevailed upon her, but promised, on his word of honour, that he would not be gone more than forty minutes. While he was absent, she composed herself. Two ideas filled her mind: the thought of his hand on her breast and the torture of the injured pony. 'Brown Boy' had made a good end for a good cause. He had served her for many years and never better than to-day. She went to his head where he lay flat, and watched his nostrils working. Then she grew angry at the delay, but knew not how herself to end the beast's sufferings. When Wolferstan arrived with two men, a cart, and a loaded gun, Primrose was sitting by the head of poor 'Brown Boy' and talking to him.

She limped and leant heavily on the Portreeve. Then he brought a bottle out of his pocket and offered it to her.

"'Tis whisky and water," he said; "the only thing that Bassett had in his cottage. Please drink some."

She obeyed and he spoke again.

"I've sent a boy running to Sourton. There'll be a trap waiting at Bassett's by the time you get there. And I said if we weren't there, to come on here. But, if we go easily, we can drive you in this cart to the corner and so save time."

"I'll try to walk—with your arm I think I might."

She limped painfully.

"Yes, I'll walk—it can't make it worse. Only I must see the end of my dear old pony before I go."

"Sam here will do that. You've had enough to suffer to-day."

But Primrose shook her head and the tears choked her. She knew that he admired her great physical bravery at all times; therefore she exercised it now.

The man stood with his gun, waiting for her to go. Then she knelt down by 'Brown Boy' and pointed to a place behind his ear.

"There," she said. "Do it quickly."

She clasped her hands and watched with a tense and straining face; then, when the existence of the little beast was closed, she took Dodd's arm and limped away. Again she wept.

"It must be brought to Bowden to be buried," she said.

"How did this dreadful thing happen?" he asked, seeking to distract her mind. "Can you remember?"

"I don't know—I never shall know. I was dreaming and driving carelessly when something—a covey of partridges, I think—terrified poor 'Brown Boy'. Before I knew what had happened he was off the road and in the water-table, and the old trap—our man actually warned me against it this very morning!"

"Where were you going?"

"To Haycraft and his wife with some things—food and a bottle of wine."

"Wine! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I forgot. I—I can't talk, Dodd. I shall faint again if I do."

"Are you in great pain?"

"That's nothing; I'm glad of it. It keeps my wits about me."

He looked at the sky. The day was darkening. Helplessly, heavily, his mind flew to Yes Tor; and Primrose knew it.

She stopped for a time to sit down, then struggled on again. The trap had not yet come and, when it did, the sufferer refused to be driven by anybody but Wolferstan.

She fainted again before the start; but soon recovered and was lifted into the vehicle.

So the Portreeve drove her to Bowden as fast as a poor horse could do the distance. Even then she would not let him go until the doctor came, and her mother also implored him to stop, because the farmer happened to be from home, and there was no man to support them.

Not until it grew dusk was he free to depart. By that time rain fell heavily, and Yes Tor was cowed in its familiar hood of wet darkness.

He went straight to the home of the Yellands at Sourton, and his own affairs filled his brain painfully. Yet upon them intruded the heart of Primrose beating under his hand; and her blood-bedappled loveliness mingled with the vision of brown Ilet waiting in lonely patience on the cloudy crown of the Moor.

When he reached her cottage door and knocked at it, there came no answering light or footstep. The place was dark and empty. Thrice he knocked; then a neighbour appeared and informed him that Susan Yelland and her niece were both absent until evening. The hour when they would return was not known.

"Perhaps she never went to Yes Tor at all," he thought.

Ignorant of where to seek her and himself physically exhausted by a long day without food, he tramped homeward. His purpose was to eat, change his soaking garments, and return to Sourton some hours later. But after putting on dry things and partaking of a heavy meal, he sat beside his fire and fell asleep there.

It was nearly three o'clock on Sunday morning before he woke up in darkness; for both fire and lamp were out. He felt cold and wretched, and oppressively conscious of coming trouble. He drank a stiff glass of spirits, prayed earnestly on his knees, and went to bed.

CHAPTER XIV

YES TOR

FROM the summit of Yes Tor the stir of the sky was visible, and clouds that huddled their purple over the southern horizon, though huge in magnitude, yet filled but a small part of the immensity of the air. From their bosoms rain slanted sharply and made a haze of light against darkness ; but the storm was many miles distant ; it travelled slowly ; the moil and mass of it thinned to the south-west, then burnt away into flame and azure about the naked, noonday sun. Earth lay outspread beneath, and its immeasurable mosaic shone heavily in the colours of winter. Deep woods and dark earth, lifeless heaths and far distant hills were woven into league-long harmonies by the splendour of the light that blazes before rain ; by the film of earth-born smoke ; by the silver of water and the magic of the remote Atlantic—unseen but not unfelt. To Dartmoor's rugged foothills spread this picture of pale gold and gloom and misty pearl ; then in primal stringency and rigour rose the tableland—lone mother of rivers and cradle of silence. Its granite planes and shattered declivities were dark ; its scarps and crags lowered savage above the tamed world at their feet. The squat skull of High Willhayes, Kneeset's rounded cone, the rock masses of Great Links, like a cloud against the clouds—these towered to south and west ; and round about interminable ridges and undulations swept shadowy upward to the central Moor. No native light touched them, but streaks and splashes of snow lingered within their northern hollows and marked coombs and desolate dingles untouched by the low winter sun. Murky, overcast, and dim, the distance sank into the darkness of the sky, so that stormward none might tell where earth ended and the air began. No smile lit that vast and stern-set face ; and yet Yelland's human heart turned her eyes away for a little, because the north spoke a gentler story and the sun shone where

Okehampton, like a grey nest, cuddled far beneath the billowy ridges of the waste. Amid green fields and forests and the sepia warmth of winter fallow it spread, shrunk to a spatter of stone-coloured dots and splashes. Above naked tracery of trees a church-tower rose and dominated all.

The spectator of imagination thus surveying a whole centre of human activity, as he might view some nest of ants, or the commonwealth of a hive, ascends from merely manlike perception to the comprehensive discrimination of a god. Thus reduced by the logic of distance, a town is shorn of its extrinsic detail in every possible direction, and can be esteemed as a whole in the balance of a single mind. Wide adjustments are then possible, and appraisements unbiased by petty particulars of human hope and fear, prosperity and failure, individual ambition and personal suffering or joy. So seen, a whole city dwindles to its just, actual, and spiritual perspective on the earth's bosom, where it lies like a spot. From Okehampton town two whole worlds stretched away under the universal sky; for upon one side the earth slept under her coverlet of fields, even to the horizon, and the Mother of all smiled through winter dreams; while over against this peace, another land ascended austere and another tale was told.

Ilet Yelland vaguely wondered as to which picture shadowed her own story. The world beyond was the life beyond—the life upon whose threshold to-day she returned—the life uncertain, boundless in its promise of good or evil—the married life with the man who loved her. Did the comfort of the valley tell it, or the coercion of this uplifted desert whereon she stood? She turned to the Moor, as one who began to feel something of its secrets. She mused whether these terrific transitions of steepness and slough, these alternations of blazing heat and light, darkness and bitter cold, would find their image in her own brief days. She felt dumbly, as all feel, that here the very soul and spirit of truth encompassed her. Sometimes she was caught up by it, sometimes depressed and saddened. Yet here was the way of greatness, if she might but see it. The Moor rang men like metal: proclaimed the strong and true; revealed the weak and false; challenged humanity; tolerated no middle courses; played the loadstone to drag elemental best and worst from human hearts. For a moment she pitied those men whose work daily

called them to its high places. Because in the lowlands was escape from one's own heart, and many hiding-places opened on the road of life, where her kind tramped it together and practised those arts of simulation vital to gregarious living among men. But here it seemed that there was no evasion. As the wind struck the stone, broke the dead fern-stalk and searched the heat of warm-blooded things that faced it, so did the spirit of wind and stone haunt these steep places and steal to the soul for good or ill. Under glare of cloudless summer days ; on the wings of the rain or from the cold breath of stealing fogs it came to her ; out of the thunder, in the snow, or where autumn ling-light laughed and vanished again, the like deep message woke.

No soul not wholly sodden can escape from it. Even the humblest unconsciously feel this magic, though they know not what they feel. To the least dweller thereon Dartmoor stands for something greater than heather and stone and the calling of the cleaves. Aforetime they peopled it with fairy spirits, half kind, half cruel ; they heard the cry of the heath-hounds by night and believed that the souls of unbaptized babies did their Maker's work under the moon, and in shape of a little pack harried and hunted the Enemy of Man. Many such-like fine things of poetry belonged to their minds ; their very words were rich with subtle meaning ; but now these opinions perish, save in ancient hearts, and only the inherent love of mystery remains. The folk dare not speak of that ; but a man may see secret superstition in their eyes sometimes and hear it in their voices, though they utter no word of it. All feel a little of the inner truth of natural things that lie scattered here even as nature left them ; many depart from their lonely homes unwillingly, and with gladness return again. And for the active intellect of man, if healthy and touched with some vital spark of imagination, as the spectre on the Brocken, so here the sane and wakeful spirit shall be faced daily, hourly, with itself—shall see itself mightily magnified and illuminated to its darkest corners.

To Hlet these voices came strenuous and searching. The Moor had entered her life like a friend. She did not know it, but often felt it, and understood inarticulately that the place was precious. To-day the wind made her hands turn red and touched her face to a tinge almost purple ; but she welcomed the cold, drank the chill air, estimated the meaning of the

cloudy activity of the south, and sighed, though not with unhappiness. It was good to be here and feel so small ; it was very good, feeling so small, to feel so strong also. Her heart wavered no more ; her recent meeting with Primrose Horn was put aside as a mean thing. She regretted her own anger. A prayer, wordless but winged, rose from her heart, and she called on Heaven to affirm her soul and sweep from it for ever all base shadows of jealousy and doubt.

In this spirit she waited very patiently, watched the south threaten and wondered why Wolferstan did not come. She walked hither and thither to warm herself, and every half-hour went a little way towards the direction he must take. Then, with sinking heart, she returned to the tor and sat down in a niche of the granite sheltered from the wind. The day became overcast. From hope and peace her soul turned and grew faint and sick. There rose a wave of anger once—like the first pulse of the rain after long drought. It passed and left her empty of all emotion. She turned over the food in her basket, but, though physically hungered, had no heart to eat. It was now nearly three in the afternoon.

At last a spot moved across the mighty loneliness. Pierce had hidden a mile off and watched her roaming, now here, now there. He hurried forward, and it became a question whether the man or the rain would reach her first. Thinking that it was Wolferstan, Ilet leapt up ; then a recoil of feeling made her turn her back, and put rocks between them, and steal to the other side of the tor. She was even in a mind to hide from him and let him search for her and not find her. She felt ashamed of herself for having waited so long. Finally, between indifference and chagrin, she adopted a middle course, sat with her back to the approaching figure and pretended to eat.

Then the footsteps came close and Ilet started and rose to her feet, for it was Abel Pierce and not the Portreeve who stood before her with his eyes upon her own.

In a moment he was beside her and, to her amazement, advanced boldly, put his arms round her, embraced her with all his strength and kissed her. She struggled fiercely and felt his breast heaving with the speed of his progress.

"Let me go—let me free—how do you dare?" she cried, thrusting him from her.

"Forgive me, Ilet ; I couldn't help it, knowing what I know and seeing what I've seen this day."

"Wolferstan——?"

"He's not coming. And I'll swear you ban't surprised to hear it."

"Not coming—not—how do you know that?"

She fell back where she had sat beside her basket, and now shrank from his ardent eyes until her shoulders pressed the granite behind her.

"Let me sit down an' I'll tell 'e every syllable."

He approached again, but did not touch her.

"Chance throwed me in sight of the man down-along. Oh, Ilet, I couldn't hardly believe my own eyesight. But 'twas true enough—that woman! I comed up behind 'em silent and sudden in a lonely place sitting by the roadside, an' his arms—she was in 'em—happy an' proud to be there!"

"She went to stop him."

"You say that!"

"I met her by Twin Tree stile. She was driving. But how do I know this be truth?"

"Because I speak it. If 'tis a lie, you can prove it by axing the man. Well you know 'tis true!"

"True enough, I dare say."

"There—heart to heart—and his ruddy face blazing, an' her head cuddled to him—as God's my judge. White as a dog's tooth with passion she was. I seed all through a hedge—all. Up to their May games beside a public road!"

"They saw you?"

"Might have, but didn't. No room in their eyes or ears but themselves. Wouldn't have seed me if I'd walked past 'em. Wouldn't have feared me more than two birds fighting fear aught else."

"Cruel—cruel!" she burst out. "And he called his God to witness——"

"Like him. What's God to him—or what be you to him? What do he care in his heart for you, or any other she but her? 'Twas only a passing whim made him fool you all these months. A word from her, an' he'd leave you to die an' rot up here afore he'd come to you. Her lips on his was enough, no doubt—beast that he be."

"You saw it?"

"May I never lift this arm again if I did not. I waited and watched to see if he'd come up here after, yet knowed he wouldn't. 'Tis easy to see it all. He wants money an' power. She can help him an' you can't. But you—you be only an honest, pure, true-hearted woman—light to that witch's darkness. No use to such a rising man! No money, no penmanship—just the soul of truth an' honour an' all that."

The present indignity troubled Ilet. Her mind could not cope with the monstrous truth in a moment. It was too large to measure while in company of any other. A trivial fact came to her lips.

"To make me traapse all up here for nought," she said feebly. Then she looked at the rain-laden sky.

"Thank your God 'twas for nought. A very merciful escape for you. He'd soon enough have sickened of your honest soul, and turned his eyes to others as crooked-hearted as himself belike—as he have before. You be mine now, as God meant 'e to be; an' I'll never let you go no more—may He judge me if I do. 'Twas always so ordained, and many foretokens have I had of late."

"He was coming to me an' she stopped him."

"Granted. What fashion of man be that to let a woman do it? Her arms round his neck—her breath on his cheek—was enough. All hell let loose wouldn't have stopped me. His arms went round her—like mine went round you."

"Could he—after his letter?"

"May God strike me if 'tisn't true—else where's the man? Oh, Ilet, Ilet Yelland, can you torment me any more? Haven't I done enough and suffered enough for you?"

"Why did you come to tell me this?"

"What more natural? Don't I love you with every thought? Was you to wait here alone with sorrow for evermore because he'd forgot you?"

"And you?"

"I don't change. Your good is my life. Only don't think I've turned him away from you, Ilet. He's turned himself away."

"I believe that now," she said.

A rush of rain swept over them and she saw the moisture make shining spots on his beard. His face was close to hers.

His eyes burned with imperishable love. For the moment he firmly believed himself both honourable and true ; because great love often deludes a lover, not only concerning the object, but also about himself. At such times he may be dazzled by his own light.

Abel felt her to be within reach at last. Her silences spoke loudly to him. Her hesitation was full of promise. Once let her say 'yes' and she would change no more.

She looked up at the gloomy sky.

"Iiet ! Ilet, be I nothing?"

For a moment more she sat irresolute, helpless, dumb ; then she wept very bitterly and suffered his embraces.

Almost immediately afterwards, by a track known to the man, they set off to his mother's house.

The great hill behind them was swallowed in grey rain, and Ilet's basket, forgotten, stood beside the place where she had waited. Then three carrion crows came croaking out of the clouds, and alighted at hand, and found the pasty that was meant for Wolferstan, and fought over it.

CHAPTER XV

THE WALK FROM CHURCH

AFTER heavy rain, the road from Okehampton to Sourton stretched bright as a river under the grey light of noon. Every pit or inequality was a pool, and the ditches ran full. Under the water, grasses waved wanly, and every blade held bubbles of imprisoned air. The day was damp and raw, but rain had ceased for a time.

Four persons walked along this soaking road and talked busily. Abner Barkell and his old friend, Ned Perryman, went together in front; behind them came Dicky and Mr. Perryman's granddaughter, Jane. The signalman and his father were going to Sunday dinner with Ned, and now they all tramped along from worship at Okehampton.

The men were dressed in their black broadcloth, and Abner also wore a big coat and a comforter of red wool, that puffed out under his long throat, like the wattles of a turkey. He and Mr. Perryman engaged in brisk conversation on the subject of the sermon. Their rusty top hats were thrust back on their heads; their ancient foreheads were wrinkled with the strain of a metaphysical discussion. The matter referred to the future state, and, in a manner common with those who hopefully near the journey's end, they found the theme of great attraction. Both felt sanguine, indeed positive; but their outlook was different, for Mr. Barkell held nebulous hopes of a state spiritual in every respect, being led to desire it by the pains of his own chronic rheumatism; while for Ned Perryman eternity without substance offered no charm.

"To be an airy sort of creation is a very comforting thought to me," declared Abner; "for 'tis very clear that a heavenly angel, such as I shall be, can't feel a twinge. I shall say 'good-

bye' to my bones with a light heart; for, to tell truth, bones and rheumatics have been one an' the same to me any time this thirty year. An' after the doing I've had with 'em, I should never trust 'em no more—not even in Heaven—but expect the stab of 'em every morning, so soon as I drewed my waking breath."

"We shall be raised in our own flesh, however, whether you like it or not," argued Mr. Perryman. "An' a good thing too, sez I. What's the sense of having no more body to you than a shirt drying on a clothes line? A very ondacent thought, if you ax me. We'm accustomed to live in our flesh an' bones; an' I shouldn't expect no lasting happiness outside 'em. Besides 'tis well known they'll be glorified out o' knowledge."

"You was always rather beastly in your ideas," argued Abner. "But if your bones had given you hell's delights, like what mine have, you wouldn't be so fond of 'em. I don't want 'em glorified; I want 'em away."

"The Book's against you all the same," asserted old Ned. "Of course it is. What's the good of golden streets if us shan't have no solid feet to tramp 'em; or of golden thrones if us ban't going to have no sit-downs to put on 'em? You oughtn't to let rheumatics drive you into such Godless thoughts, I'm sure. An' wi' all the singing, ban't there going to be no drinking? Answer that!"

Mr. Perryman's ideas were in truth earthly; but old Barkell could also quote Scripture to his purpose. He ignored the question about drinking and touched a higher matter.

"How about marrying an' giving in marriage then? That's forbid, anyway, for Bible says it. There won't be no family matters there. According to parson, us can't even say for sartin there'll be men an' women."

The other veteran's face fell.

"That's a thought that have often made me feel oneasy," he answered. "I see danger in it, an' feel glad 'tis in Higher Hands than mine."

"Danger in Heaven! Who be the Godless party now?"

"Well, I speak under correction; but when you get thousands of people living in idleness on the fat of the land, there *is* danger. Ban't the Psalms full of it? If David didn't know, who should?"

"Fear nothing," said Mr. Barkell. "'Twill all be altered there."

Mr. Perryman shook his head doubtfully.

"You can't alter human nature—everybody knows that. Think of the young people——"

"He that made 'em can change 'em. 'Tis all part of my argeyment against flesh," replied the bridge-builder. "To be a comfortable spirit above pain an' cold, wi' no parts to hinder nor itch, an' no wind to run short against a hill—that be a grander and properer thing than what you hope for. You want to carry the lusts of the flesh up-along with you; but it can't be done, Ned. I was as fond of it all as ever you was, an' took my hand at the game like a good un; but I don't want no more of it after."

"No meal times!"

"Eating an' drinking's a large part of life," admitted the other, "an' nobody could look forward to a slice of red beef an' a pint of ale more than I do at this moment; but they'm dearly bought with the sorrow of the parts that tackle 'em."

"'Tis the point of view," conceded Perryman. "If I was so round of belly an' short of breathing as you be, the angel state might draw me. But if your mind was more active, you could picture being as you be, yet without a pang, and perhaps twenty years an' a couple of stone knocked off into the bargain."

"No, I can't. I want the lot away an' everything flam new. I hope I'm right; an' you hope you'm right; but however 'tis, 'twill be for the best, so all's said."

"Parson wasn't positive."

"Never is. That's what I despise in the man. Sits 'pon the fence, like a chap mindin' rooks. If the last trump was to sound, he'd hang back an' wonder if, after all, it mightn't be the railway train waiting for Dicky's signals."

The younger Barkell here joined them.

"One thing did surprise me," he said; "but 'twasn't in the sermon."

"Them banns of marriage?" asked Jane.

"Ess fay!" answered Abner. "Dash my old wig—'tis a startler. An' yet, come to think of it, no more than Pierce himself told us to expect long since. He meant to have her. 'Twas neck or

nothing with him. Now, unless the axing out be denied next Sunday, the woman's his."

"Won't Mr. Wolferstan make a fight?" asked Ned's grand-daughter.

"I hope not," said Dicky. "I can't see that it would answer any purpose. A lot must have happened afore she let Pierce go so far as that. Anyway, 'tis a reprieve for Dodd. He's had his dose of woman now."

"Abel Pierce is an itemy* chap and have worked underground, no doubt," declared Mr. Perryman. "'Tis all part and parcel of the trouble that began at the drift. A man don't let himself be smote across the face afore the neighbours for much less than a female; though for that they'll do or suffer anything, and sink their nature to softness, like a courting tom-cat. Her love for Portreeve weren't strong enough to stand out against the lesser man; so there you are."

Dicky answered nothing, but pursued his simple custom of silence rather than criticism. Now, however, as the party crept onward to Sourton, there came towards them, walking scarcely faster than themselves, a man; and they perceived that, despite his listless, unfamiliar stride, it was Wolferstan.

He looked careworn and very gloomy, while an expression foreign to his face sat there.

The younger Barkell uttered a word of strong impatience at sight of Dodd.

"Be damned to it! I'd sooner have met any other man alive than yon chap this minute," he exclaimed.

"'Tis Providence," answered his father. "You're the man's friend. 'Twas ordained you should meet him just as you be: hot from holy worship an' full of these crooked tidings."

"An' we'll skip on," added Ned Perryman, "for 'tisn't a pleasant task just afore Sunday dinner. But it have to be—so sure as every pair of human ears, that ain't deaf, have got to take in their proper load of bad luck sooner or late."

Dicky hesitated, then decided to tell Wolferstan what had happened.

"Plague on it!" he said. "All the same, from the walk of the man, I reckon he knows."

Dodd was passing with a gesture of recognition, when the younger Barkell stopped him. The two veterans shuffled forward

* *Itemy*—tricky.

silently and Jane Perryman followed them. Then Dicky and his friend were left alone.

"I'll go a few yards back-along with you," said the signalman. "I want to speak to you."

Wolferstan nodded.

"I've got a cruel lot on my mind to-day, Dick. Fate's hard and I can't see that what has happened was right to happen, though no doubt it was—else it wouldn't have happened."

"A very comforting outlook."

"I was to have met Het by appointment yesterday and made all up. But something came between. And now I've called to explain; and it's the same dry story again—dust and ashes. She won't see me and sends word that she never will no more—never. God knows what it means."

"And a few others. I was to church to-day along with father. He likes me to be with him there. They were asked out for the first time: Abel Pierce and Het Yelland."

The Portreeve stood still.

"The banns called!"

Dicky nodded.

"She could let him do that without hearing me explain?"

"Seemingly. What kept you? 'Twas a ticklish time to bide away, after all that's happened."

"Life or death kept me. Miss Horn had been thrown out of her trap, and, by good chance, I found her unconscious and bleeding to death. I saved her life, no doubt."

"'Good chance', you say? A damned bad chance for you. And yet—maybe you're right."

"How could I go on? My hands were full."

"Full of t'other, no doubt. And that's what she's heard. And that's why you're out of the hunt."

"What could a man do? Surely common sense—humanity—"

"Common sense have lost many a woman. I'll swear it never won one!"

"To think that she——"

"Shows what the maiden's worth, Dodd."

"It shows I've got enemies—that's what it shows. Would that ignorant man have had the power to steal her away single-handed?"

"Why not? He have a fine brown face and a great power

of energy. He wasn't so busy about his own affairs as you neither. Had more time to talk nonsense to her—an' tell lies. Perhaps she don't know her own mind yet. You ought to go back and break in the door, and stand before her and talk a bit of stark sense to her. That's what she wants to hear."

The Portreeve shook his head.

"I must do no more," he said slowly. "I loved the woman better'n anything in the world; better'n any high hope I had this side of heaven. I thought and planned and cut out the future for her. I put her first. All—all she should have had. Nought was too great for me to reach—for her."

"You'll go further alone."

"The cruelty—the injustice—not to hear. 'Tis the first beginning of justice: to hear. That she could doubt was bad enough. She ought to have said, 'I know Wolferstan. He's not kept his word, and for that there's a tremendous reason.' She ought to have gone home without a flutter of doubt. She ought—instead, she jumped to evil thinking against me. An' now she's gone. A very single-eyed woman once, Barkell. All or none with her. But she didn't love me same as I loved her."

"You may have her yet."

"A man has his pride. He owes himself that. I forgive her. Ban't her fault—not all of it. I've been wickedly wronged in this; and so has she. But she'll not turn again. If she was screwed up to the banns, she'll never turn no more."

"'Twas a pity you didn't——"

"I know. I know all that. I'll rub that into myself sharper than you will. I've acted like a fool. I've been too trusting—too easy—too hopeful of goodness in all men—too ready to read good motives in 'em."

"Many cheerful young sparks begin so. You've been too trusting without a doubt. A great trust in people and an outlook—just so broad and high as your own hopes. Life's run a thought too easy for you; and you never counted on the rough weather, more than landsmen that put out to sea in a calm."

"'Tis very well for you—you who just paddle about on the edge of things and never set sail at all. Well for you to preach! What do you know of the cruel truth of things?"

"Us be the sort to preach, for that matter. We see the game from outside."

"Who can preach to suffering men that hasn't suffered himself? Who can help to heal a hurt that hasn't writhed under one? To think of all she was to me, and all she said to me! Oh, Dick, ban't there no truth in 'em?"

"'Tis mixed with such a lot else. Fate have weaved a bit of bad luck for you, old man. But don't take it overmuch to heart. You're not the first a woman have jilted."

"'Twas not her fault, I tell you."

"The end's the same."

"I see my life," said the Portreeve. "I see myself working as few men have worked, leaping to every shadow of a chance to push ahead, never missing the least offer. And all the time I've trusted in man as few trust him."

"And in God," murmured Barkell. "One's as tricky as t'other."

"You're a bitter fool, Dick. But 'tisn't God—'tis man that have ill-used me now—stabbed me in the back—somebody as never suffered from me neither, for no living man has suffered at my hand. I forgive Ilet with all my heart. This was no work of hers."

"Don't fox yourself to think that. That's mad. The banns was read in church. They are all alike, and their hearts be the stones in beautiful ripe plums,—hard—hard."

"He's a hookem-snivey blackguard, Dick."

"He is—when the wind blows from Sourton. Nobody's straight all round."

"He don't deserve one spark of happiness."

"Therefore he's the more like to have it."

"I might take the law in my own hands but for her. She's chose him."

"Better you go to church and pray, Portreeve."

"You advise that out of a sneering heart. Yet 'tis the properest thing you've said to me."

"Shall you forbid the banns next Sunday?"

"Could a man that was a man? No; she's gone. There's no fighting that. Ilet was jealous of Primrose Horn ever since I knowed her. Often she's hated to think that t'other met me long years before she did. Things have worked together for harm against me. 'Twas almost as if an evil spirit throwed me in the other's path again and again."

"But you don't believe in evil spirits, surely? 'Twas the work of your watching God—must have been."

"An' so I'll read it," said the sufferer stoutly.

"You'll grin and bear?"

"I'll be patient, if I can. I don't realize my loss yet. Think of her dead—dead to me."

"Patience is a grand thing."

"You think I'm cringing to my Maker like a cur under this. That's because you're Godless yourself and don't understand. He'll speak to me come presently."

"I'm afraid He's too busy, Dodd."

"You'll rue these wicked speeches some day, Richard."

"If I'm wrong, I'll confess to it without a tremble; an' if His rule be Love, as you think and all men hope, then I'll remind Him to do unto others as He'd be done by. He must forgive me then. Go on with your life and see where it lands you. Go on trusting in your Heavenly Father and see what the future be like that He's planned for you."

"That I shall do—as we all must. If life teaches me to doubt all living, 'twill never shake my trust in Him."

"And let me be your friend. I wish you nothing but good, and I'll serve you with heart and head so long as it is in my power. Don't scoff at lookers-on. They often come in useful—if 'tis only to pull a fallen man from under his horse, or save a drowning fellow-creature."

"You try to shake my trust in all things and then ax me to trust you," said Wolferstan with some bitterness.

"You're right and I'm wrong," answered the other promptly. "Trust none—none—neither man nor woman. Go your way free and count all for enemies. Then the world can't disappoint you, and human nature can't."

"A friendless man is a useless man."

"Friendship's like beauty, I tell you: only skin deep. Won't stand the strain of time too long. Be tender where you think you're fond."

"Good-bye," answered Wolferstan. "'Tis a thought strange that such a cold-blooded man as you was sent to tell me this harsh news."

"Better for you than some milder fashion of fool, full of soft soap and sympathy. See how cool you be yourself: that's because

I am. If I'd begun saying how sorry I was, you'd have knocked me down. You'll understand when a few months have rolled over you. Good-bye—and, trust or no trust, I'm your friend always, and you know it."

The men separated and Dodd Wolferstan went slowly on towards Bowden.

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

COMBE CLIFFS

ILET YELLAND first heard the true explanation of her old lover's absence on the day that her banns were called for the second time. The matter came through minor channels: she did not learn it from Wolferstan. Had he himself told her, it is unlikely that she would have wavered again; but the Portreeve did not court another denial; and when Abel Pierce was called upon to explain his statement, he found no difficulty in doing so. It was not denied that Miss Horn had reposed in her rescuer's arms, and Abel merely chronicled the fact. He explained that he had witnessed the tender embrace through a hedge at a considerable distance, and then gone his way quite ignorant of all that went before. He offered to release Ilet when the facts became known, but not until he knew that she had determined with herself. Dodd was right when he said the woman did not easily change. With very genuine and bitter grief she took the great step of throwing him over; but having done so, she did not turn back or look back. Conscious of wrong in right and right in wrong, believing the threads of this misfortune too tangled for extrication, she balanced Wolferstan's errors against her own, and banished the subject by force of will and natural narrowness of mind. A ravel of issues was hateful to her; doubt and uncertainty and weighing of contending claims drove her mad. Her brain was not constituted to endure this exercise.

Abel Pierce became her life. She refused to torture her mind any more with a dark and difficult past; but thrust it and all that belonged to it away and faced the future resolutely. For Pierce—as part of him, to toil and fight for him and only him, she now stood. She was not logical and she was not reasonable; but it cannot be denied that, having decided, she was sensible. Her mind, fashioned in one compartment, contained no room for

large synthetical operations, and abstract justice was not a quality of it. But she had a power of deliberately narrowing her outlook, and such limitation of interest begot increased intensity, as a stream wastes its strength upon the broad shallows, but applies it to full purpose in some narrow channel. Abel Pierce, if a bad man, was a good lover. He and Ilet made immediate preparations for their marriage. He engaged himself to do permanent work at Meldon quarry; she promised to come and live at Fishcombe Cottage at his wish.

Within three months Ilet was married. She set about the business of wifehood in a staunch spirit that turned neither to the right nor left; while as for Abel, he soon felt the pricks grow blunt, and from uneasiness at his past knavery, drifted into indifference and thence to content. He was proud of Ilet, and she blessed his home abundantly. All envied him such sustained happiness. He had a mother and wife who lived for him and ministered to his every want, softened his dark moments, shared his hopes and strengthened his ambitions. Ilet imparted her outlook to him. He grew more self-respecting and was presently promoted to be foreman of a quarry gang. He saved weekly; he fell in with his mother's wish—vain till now—and often took her to church on Sunday. But Ilet was not fond of worship, for it served always to remind her of Wolferstan. Therefore she usually stopped at home and cooked the dinner.

The Portreeve sank to a name by Fishcombe Head Water, though Pierce, now himself grown desirous to rise above a labourer's life, watched the other's progress keenly. No jealousy marked this attitude. He was glad to see Dodd prosper, and his old enemy's success illogically but naturally soothed his own conscience. One uneasiness reigned in his heart, however, for Wolferstan's engagement to Primrose Horn was not announced. Daily he expected it, but the news never came. Ilet also could not escape from thought upon that matter, and she marvelled that her former lover remained single. To her, as to her husband, the fact that he should do so was painful; and in addition, Abel went under a secret care, for his accomplice never acknowledged him again after the day of her accident. They met more than once alone, but she appeared to have forgotten his existence and passed him without a sign. At first he was satisfied at this and felt it to be right and wise; but when months went by and Wolferstan

remained unbetrothed, Pierce grew anxious and wondered if Primrose—in face of the Portreeve's indifference—would not presently plan a revenge which might involve his welfare. He was haunted by the fear for a time; then it faded, and with passage of days his content increased, and he lived in the full bliss of the time and found each hour with Illet a feast.

Wolferstan likewise pursued his road. None knew of the full bitterness of his grief or the darkness of spirit that encompassed him for many months. It was significant of his genuine love that even ambition fainted awhile beneath this blow. In his tribulation periods of natural rage flooded the man's mind, and he had much ado to control his wrath and deny it shape of action. But in these earlier years Wolferstan was at his best. He had ripened swiftly and attained to fruition while yet young. He had matured without any winter of sorrow to sweeten him. The sun of religion had burnt upon his heart and wrought it to mellowness. The Rock of Ages was no mythic image or poetical conceit to him; it proved a present support and refuge in his first great trouble. Prayer heartened him, soothed his soul, woke a great patience, and even restored his native cheerfulness after the passing of time. Without being shallow, he was yet one whose emotions were more keen than deep. Religion for such a nature often suffices. It guides the grief-stricken swiftly through the pinch of affliction, and offers the needed anodyne during moments of critical stress. But more subterranean spirits find it vain. Them a master-sorrow dominates for ever and, while hidden from all eyes, still lives and leaves its scorch upon the heart, its furrows and haggard traces in the soul. Faith is seldom the strength of men who feel so deeply; and reason cannot dry all tears. To the rational sufferer separation is eternal, death final. His stern solace is the knowledge that he endures the immemorial tortures of all conscious existence since its dawn in tertiary times; that the dust under his feet has suffered as he suffers to-day; that after eight thousand years of man, no human agony is new; and that the thing which cannot be borne brings its own end with it. And if he is strong to survive and go on with life and justify his days, for him Time, who forgets no sorrowful heart, shall presently tend the inner, everlasting wounds, so that they throb with intermittent stroke alone.

Wolferstan, in fine humility, looked to his religion to lift him

above this mighty trial ; and faith, triumphing over the blow, brought him steadily back to peace. In due season the dominant forces of his own nature reasserted themselves and obliterated the poignant details of the past. After three months he was lifting his head again among men, again teaching his boys those Bible lessons which he believed lay at the root of temporary human happiness and eternal human prosperity. His own trials he doubted not were sent for high purposes by a watchful God. He suspected that they would raise him, fortify him, arm him against the further problems that life held hidden. He did not repine ; he endured ; and at the bottom of his heart was a germ of pride that he had stood so strong against the storm. He told himself in side-flashes of thought (which yet shamed him by their vain-glory) that a man who would come out of this furnace unscathed might face any future with hope. He supposed that love had been the first passion in him, and that this ordeal must, therefore, have exceeded any possible tribulation that time could bring ; but herein he erred. There was that in his nature that sank deeper and rose higher than love of women. It remained to be seen whether his guides would be strong enough to surmount attacks on his ambitions and the very fabric of his life's work.

For the present he plunged into affairs and found in ceaseless toil a respite from thought. Minor successes fell to his lot. He sought and obtained an excellent commission to provide photographs for a forthcoming work ; he also undertook various important duties for Mr. Horn, who was indisposed during spring-time. To Dodd fell the conduct of some considerable stock sales, together with attendance at markets. After his own judgment of horned beasts, the farmer rated most highly that of Wolferstan ; and since the Portreeve entertained a lively regard for his old master, he was glad enough to serve in this matter. The work answered a twofold purpose, for it advantaged Alexander Horn and introduced the Portreeve to new and influential people. He had a genius for pleasing his betters, winning their interest and securing their goodwill

With April it happened that he was in North Cornwall, and his work took him to the historic hamlet of Combe, nigh Morwenstow. Having swiftly decided against certain purchases, he found himself with an hour to spare before his trap should return.

The great voice of the sea drew him, and, descending through

the valley, where a trout stream glittered under budding willows, he approached the beach and stood in the home of the west wind. Before him league-long surges rolled, and the great song of sea and stone murmured upon his ear.

Now chanced a meeting that served much to astonish two people, and created a very mistaken impression in the mind of one.

After her accident Miss Horn had chosen to persist in a very long convalescence; but nothing came of it. Wolferstan called thrice to learn how she fared. Once she saw him, and he expressed sympathy and concern for her; but his mind was obviously very full of his own affairs, and his manner was often absent.

Concerning Primrose at this moment he only knew that she was from home, and his astonishment appeared in his face as she suddenly confronted him on Combe beach. The tide was low and they met where a ridge of rock glimmered from barred sands, shone with sepia-coloured weed and exuded the sweetness of the sea. Westerly the foam flew and great, oncoming waves rolled leaden against the lighter grey of the sky.

Primrose, who was visiting a friend at Combe Mill, found it natural to start and flush at this surprise. Ignorant of the truth, she supposed that Wolferstan was here for the purpose of seeing her. It appeared most improbable that this lengthy expedition could have been made for any lesser reason. In fact, she doubted not that her reward was at hand. She let her hunger and thirst run riot. Her eyes shone upon him. She uttered a little, glad, inarticulate sound and held out her hands.

He took one of them and she let the other fall quickly.

"What a surprise to see you here," he said. "I wonder which of us has astonished the other most?"

"Why, surely you," she answered. "I suppose you knew that I was here; but how could I expect you?"

"Indeed, no. I only knew you were away. The governor was so busy about business with Tresidda up the valley, that he quite forgot to tell me you were at Combe."

"Then I shall lecture him for such selfishness when I go home. You've made me feel quite shaky. Let us stop here a minute and watch the sea creep up."

They sat silent a moment and watched where the Atlantic came, like the trampling of an army to the music of breaking waves.

"I do hope you are really quite yourself again," he said.

"Oh, yes—well enough. And you? You must let me dare to touch an old wound—a deeper one than mine."

"Thank God it was no worse with you."

"And thank God yours was no worse, dear Dodd. I've heard everything. It's ruined my life. 'Twas all my doing. The heart-broken nights I've had! To think—to think—I've altered all your life. I wish I had died sooner."

She put her handkerchief to her eyes, and the spectacle of her tearful and moist loveliness made him feel gentle.

"Don't say that. Nothing happens that's not overruled, Primrose. 'Twas a terrible, shattering trouble; but it had to be. We plot and we plan, and we count on the future with large trust; but the outcome of things ban't our work."

"Only 'tis hard through tears to see the Hand that guides," she said. "You've got such wonderful faith to light your dark places. I wish you could teach me to trust like you can."

"If you long to do it, and have the will, the rest is easy," he assured her. Then he preached a little.

Primrose began to feel bored and cold. Her sudden flame of hope perished and left a bad odour in her soul. The great waves came closer and shafts of foam leapt like feathers against the ocean-facing rocks. The sea surged into every pool and brought back the salt of life to unnumbered things. There came dull, hollow blows and reverberations; then sheaves of glittering water spouted aloft and fell with a splash, like a sigh, upon the tumbling green below. Light broke through the clouds; wan fans of radiance fell and spread in pools of gold upon the face of the sea.

Primrose put herself out of her misery.

"Why are you here, since it was not to see me, I'm afraid?"

"That's a very unexpected pleasure, truly."

"Yet I'm glad you came. I've had it in my mind to write to you. Indeed, I began, but couldn't find the words. When I think of you, I always fall into weakness and shame for the unconscious wrong I have done you."

"Don't say it or think it more. 'Tisn't so."

"You forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive. You were never to blame."

"I feel—I feel so strange with you—like a slave—as if I belonged to you in a sort of way. I ruined your life and you—you saved mine. Yes—saved it. Sometimes I wonder why."

"Your beautiful, brave life," he said thoughtfully. "No, I can hardly claim such a great deed as saving it. But I'm glad 'twas me, an' no stranger man, came just then."

"You can say that and remember the dreadful result?"

"I don't join the two ideas in my mind."

"Then I am glad too—oh, so thankful! I should have died afterwards to think that any human being had touched me but you. But you——"

She broke off, took his hand suddenly between hers and kissed it. He grew red.

"Don't—don't, for God's sake!" he cried. "An unworthy thing like me!"

She turned away from him. Her emotion was genuine enough; but disappointment and irritation formed the first ingredients thereof. Wolferstan, not being a fool, understood and yearned to escape. The possibility of marrying Primrose had indeed occurred to him on one occasion, after seeing her since his own catastrophe; but that shock was too recent; Illet was too constant a dweller in his mind to leave room for serious thoughts of any other woman. Now the business was thrust rather crudely uppermost again; and he recoiled—from no dislike of Primrose, for he felt the gentleness bred in any man's soul by love declared—but because the time was far from ripe.

"You forgive me—say it," she murmured, looking at the sea.

"Indeed, yes. I don't want to think any more about it. And I can't talk about it. 'Tis terrible near still. Presently——"

"If by flinging myself into that great sea and drowning there, I could bring back happiness to you and your faith in woman, I'd do it and die gladly."

"You mustn't say such things. Who am I to lose faith in man or woman either? This that has happened to me was woven in the web. It had to be. Nothing from outside can lastingly harm a man. That's my faith. Let them as do the evil look to it."

"You've paid, however," she answered quietly.

His patience failed to win her admiration, albeit patience was her own strongest quality.

A wave spread in successive transparent layers, foam-fringed, at their feet. It hurtled slantwise, like the sweep of a liquid scythe, and gathered a harvest of tinkling shells to its bosom. The sand hissed and shone ; a few great bubbles trembled and burst.

"We must be going," said Dodd. He did not answer her last speech. A pathway known to Primrose wound up the face of the cliff. Now she took him by it and their conversation touched general subjects and found him easier. He told her the news concerning his photographs and the work for her father.

The time passed and the sky largely cleared as it made ready for night. The man and woman looked out upon a semicircle of mighty cliffs that shone in the radiance of the west. The illumination played on their dark faces, searched their rifts and crags, lightened their gloomy planes. Fading away into the atmosphere, they sank southerly, and strata swept with many an undulation upon their foreheads, where they stood with wrinkled, sightless brows bent seaward. Over them there brooded the breath of ocean made visible. It softened each shelf and precipice, pinnacle and island rock ; it blurred the distance gently and glowed into red gold as the sun descended. Over the desolation of the shore it floated, dilated ; now hung, like a mock sun, upon the last confines of earth ; now spread, like a cloud, even to the lips of the sea. It was as though the ambient air caught fire and burned.

CHAPTER II

LUCK FOR SLANNING

ON a day when the young year grew beautiful with flowers and musical with song, Orlando Slanning was fortunate and met Miss Horn beside the river. He had not seen her for some months, and his repeated inquiries since her accident had met no warmer response than acknowledgment; but to-day, while fishing in Oke, midway between Homerton Hill and the great gorge of Meldon, Primrose met him and brought joy to his spirit. He had just creeled a half-pounder, when his 'March Brown,' instead of dropping at the edge of a little, oily back-water, where yellow foam danced under an overhanging bank, went three inches wide and got foul of a root that thrust out from the earth. He knew the pool beneath as being often good for a fish, but now his chance was lost; therefore Orlando, with a mild expletive, grounded his rod and looked for a place to cross that he might liberate his fly. The fisherman walked fifty yards down stream and suddenly found himself face to face with Primrose. She was strolling beside the water and with her came three cheerful fox-terriers and a retriever who, though elderly, yet felt Spring in his bones and gambolled with the others.

At the breast of Miss Horn was a flower, and in her hand a whip. She was looking exceedingly well and appeared slightly pleased to see the sportsman. He rejoiced at her friendly greeting and forgot all about his rod.

"What frightful good luck!" he said. "I *am* glad to see you again—thankful, in fact."

She gave him her hand, and he shook it a long time. Then he patted each dog in turn. They had all rushed up at the welcome spectacle of a sportsman.

"You don't want a perfect 'wire-haired' pup, I suppose? I can get you a little three months old bitch that's a dream—really," he said.

She shook her head and they strolled together, while he asked warmly concerning her health.

"When I heard about that appalling accident, I could have cut my throat to think it wasn't I who saved you. The ghastly luck some men have—and don't seem to know it—that's the maddening part."

Primrose seconded this sentiment in secret. Her visible answer was the faintest blush.

"I'm quite well again—have been for months. It was hardly so serious as people supposed."

"It hasn't hurt your nerve? Don't say that. It would be a county misfortune if you chucked hunting."

"My nerve is all right. I shall hunt again next season."

"My poor old governor's going down the hill fast. I wish I could take the pain for him. It's cruel to see him suffer."

"I am very sorry. Why don't the doctors let him go out of his misery—like we do with dumb things?"

"What an idea! He'll be gone soon enough, poor old chap: then I must begin to take life seriously."

"You're too old to begin now."

"I'd start to-morrow if I had any inducement. I'm rather a clever chap in a way—really I am—to say it without boasting. A wide experience of life. But I'm a soldier by instinct."

"Still?"

"Don't! You do laugh at a chap so."

"A versatile man—and volatile too."

"Versatile, perhaps—not t'other thing. I don't change—not in some matters, God knows. I can tell perfection when I see it."

"Can you? How? One hasn't many opportunities of judging that."

"No—jolly few; but I'm the sort of man that doesn't miss the rare chance when it offers. My knowledge of your sex is pretty deep, Miss Horn."

"You honour us by thinking so much about us."

He missed the mild irony and was gratified.

"Yes; and when I tell you that I've met feminine perfection at last, you must forgive me for being obstinate."

"Not in Plymouth?"

"Blessed if I don't believe you understand me inside out! I should like to know what is in your mind."

"I'm not sure that you would."

"Look here," he said, as his rod came in sight standing beside the river; "do me an enormous favour—please do."

"Of course—if I can."

■ "Are you in a hurry to-day?"

"Not in the least."

"Then lunch with me. I implore it. You'll make me happy for a week if you will. You know my mother always puts up lunch for three people when I go fishing. Do stop and share my sandwiches and things. I beseech you. I make a very great favour of it."

"All right, if you like."

"Hurrah—three cheers—my luck's up!"

He swung a big creel off his shoulder and produced packets of sandwiches, hard-boiled eggs and cake tied up in silver paper. A great flask also appeared.

"If I had only known," he said, "I'd have gone to Plymouth yesterday and bought the daintiest and most delicious things—a lunch fit for a queen—and a bottle of sparkling moselle with the muscat grape taste you like."

"Glad you didn't know then. I'll sit here. Any sport?"

"A dozen little chaps and a few decent ones. I was going to bring them to Bowden on my way home, hoping you'd accept 'em."

"Gladly. Father loves a trout. I've been lazy this year. I'm right off fishing."

"You're an awful dab at it."

She looked at his fish and smelt their savour.

"They half tempt me," she said. "Get across and clear your fly, and I'll unpack."

As happy as the dogs, Orlando obeyed. He purposely chose a perilous pass and leapt with great agility from rock to rock; but she was not interested in the display. A flash of light had caught her eye some distance up the river, and she saw a man's shirt hanging on a line. It stood near the dwelling of Abel Pierce, though the house was not visible from her standpoint.

When Slanning returned, his luncheon was spread on paper plates, and Primrose already had a sandwich in her hand. The

dogs drew up and sat in an amiable, inquiring circle, with lolling tongues and hopeful expressions.

"You were right," said the guest. "I'm sure there is more food than you wanted here. These sandwiches are much too good for a man."

"They are; but, from a mother's silly point of view, nothing's too good for a son."

He watched her eat with delight.

"Always my luck," he said. "I hesitated between whisky and sherry this morning, and of course chose the wrong one."

"From my point of taste or yours?"

"From yours."

"I'm indifferent. I very, very seldom take anything. I love beer——"

"So do I—only it's too——" he was going to say 'fattening', but saved himself. "Too dangerous for a gouty man."

"You're not gouty?"

"No, but my mother's father was. I'm always in a funk of it."

Presently he fetched water from the river for her. Then, while he loaded his pipe, she took his rod.

"Try the pool where I got hung up," he said. "There's often a fish there."

She flung a careful fly, moved a small trout, but failed to hook him. Then her native instinct awoke and she went forward, fishing the stream in the usual moorland fashion.

"Try the deep water," he cried to her. "They're not in the stickles to-day."

He lighted his pipe, picked up his creel and the mackintosh he had spread for her to sit upon; then followed at a distance.

Presently Primrose hooked a fish and in half a minute had him at her feet. Thereupon Slanning made great play with his landing-net, though the size of the trout rendered this quite unnecessary. The woman was in a good temper now, and he felt it. A sudden inspiration seized him to strike while the iron was hot and put the familiar question once again. Something in the vernal weather and in her apparent cheerfulness made him feel almost sanguine. She refused to fish again and bade him return the trout to the river.

"I hate killing these undersized things," she said. "It's not sportsmanlike. They ought to make it a crime."

"The Oke is poached a lot," he declared. Then they crossed the river and ascended a little way on the other side. From this vantage ground the cottage of Pierce appeared gleaming white and nestling in its proper dimple of two hills, like a pearl in a woman's bosom.

"I'll bet that beggar takes good toll of this water," said Orlando.

• "He is called Pierce," she said. "He works at the railway quarry. He married that young woman who was once said to be engaged to Mr. Wolferstan."

"By Jove! Fancy! What an escape! Eat lots of rising men marry while still in the chrysalis stage, and then, when they turn into butterflies and find their wives still remaining grubs, they get sick about it and are sorry they married at all."

Primrose was slightly astonished at the remark.

"Since when did you grow so observant?" she asked.

"I heard your mother say that. Though I'd often thought it myself before. I am a philosopher in a small way—really. If not, I should have cut my throat long ago."

"More fools than philosophers do that. What catastrophe ever made you think of such a step?"

"A series. I can give you the dates, if you like. They mean a lot to me—not much to you, I'm afraid. The last tragic event was at the end of August—one week before the colt-drift."

She recollected a proposal.

"I remember. Don't shorten your days on that account. Here's my path. I must climb up over South Down and so home. You'll go on fishing."

"No, I shan't. I'm coming with you. Let me carry these trout to the governor."

"As you please—and have a cup of tea."

"Thanks awfully—this is a red-letter day for me. I want to hear all about your dreadful accident from your own lips, you know."

"I've forgotten all the particulars, I'm glad to say."

"I wager the Portreeve hasn't."

"I think he has."

"Dolt—ruffian—boor! How extraordinary it is the way that fellow prospers."

"Why extraordinary? He's a very clever man."

"I don't know. He called me 'poor Slanning'. That was meant insolently. I'm awfully touchy, you know—every soldier is. I met him a month ago right bang in the middle of the Moor. I was riding; he was on foot with his photograph machine. A mist came down on us like night, and I was clean beat by it; but he wasn't—knew every boulder we passed apparently. I admit he is very civil-spoken, as a rule, for a man in that position. He showed me the way and had evidently quite forgotten that little business at the drift—when I—made rather a fool of myself."

"Yes."

"I say—between friends, Miss Horn—does he——? I can't help asking—yet—of course it's no business of mine. Yet——"

"Look!" she said. "D'you see that speck at the cottage door down there? That is the woman Mr. Wolferstan wanted to marry; but she threw him over."

"Hard to believe. Why? Did anybody in our class of society ever hear?"

"It was known. An unfortunate misunderstanding."

"Well—what does it matter? Or her? Or anything in the world but you and me? Stop for two minutes while I take down my rod. I can't talk and climb both. And I want some fresh fern for the fish."

They found a flat stone and rested awhile. The dogs yelped, squeaked and scurried every way, hunting rabbits in the furze. Far below, separated from them by the great hill and the river, like a silver ribbon at its feet, a woman still stood and gazed before her.

"I suppose it's mad to begin again; but I can't help it. It's my life—my God—really—religion—everything. You, I mean. If you could only think it was good enough; but I suppose it isn't. You're never out of my mind ten minutes together—solemn truth. I'm a frightfully steadfast chap. I shall never change—never."

"Oh, yes, you will; and find somebody much more interesting than I am!"

"You know better. Do think of it, Primrose."

"Haven't I?"

"If it's the mill, I don't care a damn about that. I'd sell it—anything."

"It's not the mill. I like the mill very much. A pleasant home for anybody. You'll do well to be a miller and live in sound of that great, hard-working wheel, and learn from it. You must do something. Why not that?"

"Yes—with you. I'd be happy enough at Slanning's—or anywhere—with you. It's you or nobody."

"We must go on with our lives," she answered; and in her voice was irresolution.

"Yes; but how jolly hard with this doubt and misery turning my hair grey."

"Grey hair would tone you down and give you a very distinguished look. You ought to thank me if I'm doing that."

He sighed mightily and regarded his boots and stockings.

"I'll never change," he repeated.

"Perhaps I shall."

"That's something."

Her eyes were upon the remote cottage. They passed over the great declivities of blue stone, whitethorn and blazing furze, then rested on the home of Ilet Pierce.

"'Tis human nature to change. At least you can find room in your heart for love. That's in your favour."

"Room! What sane man that knows you could find room for anything else?"

She contrasted this whole-hearted sentiment with the fitful and frosty friendship of the Portreeve; then swiftly she checked the thought as being most unfair. Wolferstan was scarcely yet through the fire of a great disappointment. Perhaps the very name of woman hurt him still. Time—ample time he must have. She made a thousand excuses for him and explained and condoned his attitude. The bigger the man and the deeper his spirit, the longer he might be expected to suffer. Summer and ripe autumn must doubtless turn him again to gentler ways and gentler thoughts. The idea comforted her, and this augmented hope of one man made her kind to the other. She valued Slanning's stout affection as an advertisement, and knew that he felt passion for her as genuine as his heart could hold. She liked him the better for these periodic avowals. He had been faithful for three years. She took the flowers from her dress and handed them to him.

"For me!" he gasped.

"Payment for my luncheon. Don't kiss them! That's silly. They mean nothing. They are dead already."

"They'll never die—never. The only flowers in the world."

"The Spring is making you quite poetical. Mother will fall in love with you if you talk that nonsense to her. Come; I'm rested."

They went forward by zigzag ways, reached the woods that crowned the hill, and disappeared from the watcher below. She had seen them stop awhile and then proceed. She did not recognize them, but pictured lovers. They vanished presently and still her dark eyes scanned the hill. South Down was an ever-present picture for her. Nature worked thereon in mighty moods with air and water, frost, fire and the ever-changing fabric of living things.

Ilet loved this spectacle: in sunlight or rain, before dawn, at eventide, or under the moon, she loved it. The Moor still attracted her and was her friend; but this hill became a personal thing and part of her life. Now daily she marked the pageant of Spring unfold; yet she leapt forward in spirit to the end of another year and wondered whether her baby or the early flakes of December's snow would first arrive at the cottage by Oke.

CHAPTER III

THE DINNER HOUR

THE viaduct of Meldon was being painted, and men, looking no larger than spiders, hung from ropes about it. Mr. Abner Barkell took a very active interest in these operations and buzzed hither and thither. The painters often wished him away, but Abner made up for any little annoyance which he caused in working hours by being very serviceable when the time came for dinner and rest. Then, from his adjacent cottage, hot water might be procured and his stock of utensils was also at the service of the little army of operatives during their stay.

A dozen men were sitting at dinner on a hot June day under the shadow of trees near the viaduct, and Mr. Barkell surveyed them with an amiable yet regretful expression.

"I shall miss you, souls; I shall miss you something cruel when you'm all gone an' the bridge be left to my care once more."

"You look after it sharp, gaffer," said a young painter called Tom Ball. "Else belike 'twill get up on its hind legs an' run away."

The fiction of Mr. Barkell's great responsibility was understood.

"Ban't feared of that, Tommy," he answered. "I'd sooner look after Meldon Viaduct than you any day. 'Tis straighter an' stouter, an' will wear better than ever you will. 'Twould be a poor look out for human nature if you had so much thrown 'pon your shoulders as thicky bridge have."

Johnny Ball, Tommy's brother and a youth of more staid spirit, answered.

"That's right. You talk to him, Mr. Barkell. 'Tis more'n I can do to larn him sense, for all he's my brother."

"Know too much about you," said Tommy. "Nobody ever thinks nought of a brother's opinion—specially if they live in the same house an' see each other's weaknesses."

Richard Barkell approached grumbling from his house.

"You chaps be getting above a joke," he began, addressing the company in general. "Here I come for bit and sup, an' can't find so much as a crust in the larder."

"My fault, Dick," explained his father. "Oliver Mason here was hustled from his house this morning, owing to Mrs. Mason being a thought cranky. An' he comed away without his dinner—just to mark his annoyance."

"Or my breakfast," said the man Mason. He was a thin, unwholesome, sandy person, soaked, as it seemed, with turpentine. "Yes, I just rose up an' went from the house hungry—to show my great indignation. I'm among friends, I believe—else I wouldn't say it; but man to man, she's a terror and something's got to be done for my peace, or I shall burst out."

"Set the Salvation Army on her," suggested Abner.

But Mr. Mason disapproved the idea. He exhibited the humorous spectacle of a man at once hen-pecked and jealous.

"Not if I can prevent it," he answered. "That chap Foster—'Captain' Foster he calls himself—silly poop!—I can't stand his airs an' graces an' foolish clothes. He's a darned sight too fond of getting the women to go an' hear him bleat his nonsense on Sundays. An' I've noticed 'tis only the good-looking ones he'm so anxious to gather to the fold. He come smirking to my door with a tract only last night; an' I went out in a proper rage. But I never said a word—knowed him too well for that. I just put out my tongue at him scornful, an' banged the door to in his face. That's the way to treat 'em."

"Nothing daunts you when you'm roused, I see," said Dicky; "all the same, perhaps 'tis because you did that, that your missis was sharp with you this morning. That's called cause and effect in learned language."

As he spoke, Richard helped himself to a snack of food here and there from those who were willing to oblige him.

Mr. Mason shrugged his shoulders.

"Come what will, I'll be master in my own house," he said.

"A very proper resolve," declared old Abner. "'Tis always a brave man's view of the question—when he ban't there. But a voice will change it."

Talk returned to the bridge, and Mr. Barkell told of its past history and magnified his own share in the construction. Year by

year his memory played him wilder pranks in this particular, and gradually he credited himself with higher responsibility and wider achievements in connexion with the viaduct. This fact the unfilial Dicky pointed out.

"Go on! Go on!" he said. "Why don't you tell 'em you built the bridge single-handed, my old dear—after you'd drawn out the plans? I'm sure you'll think so if you're spared a few more years."

Old Barkell shook his head.

"To think 'tis my own flesh an' blood can tell like that. You'll be sorry, Dicky, that you let your tongue wag in that fashion, when I'm took from you, an' there's only hirelings to mind the bridge."

A bell sounded presently and the men prepared to return to work. Then came Abel Pierce up the valley and spoke with the brothers Tom and John Ball, who were related to him. Old Ned Perryman from Sourton was with him, and anon, when the painters had departed, Ned sat down to rest and Pierce delayed a moment on his way to the quarry and lighted his pipe.

Old Barkell was still eating. He chewed each mouthful very long and slowly. With him, indeed, a meal was a laborious business. Ned had marked the peculiarity long ago and now ventured to comment upon it.

"Lord! How your father do dawdle over his good things," he said to Dicky.

Abner heard and answered—

"You're right: I do, Ned. 'Tis a lifelong habit, an' I've always done the same whether 'twas eating, drinking, courting, sleeping, or any other delight of life. Once, when I was a little boy, my mother promised me a lollipop if I was so good as gold all day long. An' I won it; but by a fatal accident I let the sweetie slip down my throat right away, an' so missed all the long-drawn-out comfort of un. 'Twas a bitter loss to me, an' my mother, being a hard woman, wouldn't give me another. So I've took darned good care to chew my pleasures since then, an' make 'em go so far as they'll carry."

"'Tis half the wisdom of life to know what to bolt an' what to chew," said Dicky.

"Yes," answered his father; "an' another hint I can give you younger men. Think a lot about pleasure afore it comes, an' then

if the cards go against you an' it don't come at all, still you've gotten something out of it, if 'twas only the sauce of expecting."

"Expecting ban't no delight to me," said Pierce. "'Tis a very uneasy, unfinished sort o' state."

"Expecting good, I mean, not ill. Ban't no pleasure to expect death, or dismissal, or any other such ugly mishap; but given a good time coming, 'tis wise to ponder it in hope."

Abel nodded.

"That's right enough," he said. "I feel that—nobody more so; for ban't my wife in the family way? I shall be a father come next winter. 'Tis a very gracious state of mind. Yet us would be a thought happier if us could take the work off their shoulders. A strong man would make light of such a job, no doubt; but 'tis awful to think of women you care about suffering it."

"You'm out there," answered Mr. Perryman. "We talk a lot about bearing pain in the pride of our strength; but we'm not a patch on females at it. True they don't make such a noise about it afore it comes; but when 'tis on 'em, they be worth a score of us. They fear it more an' bear it better. They endure easier an' die easier than us. As for child-bearing, us shouldn't be in it with 'em."

"'Tis their passionate love of little ones keeps 'em up," said Abner. "Men folk haven't got it."

"But this man have," answered his son, pointing at Pierce. "He loves the childer like any mother. 'Tis a twist in his nature. Don't you—eh?"

"I do—I dote on 'em," admitted Abel. "Can't put it in words; but there it is. I wish they'd got the power to have made me a better fashion of man."

This surprising sentiment begot silence.

Then Abner expressed a hope that Abel might have a daughter.

"I trust it may be first a girl an' then a boy," he said. "That was the old, gentlemanlike wish, an' nobody could better it."

Pierce nodded and relapsed into his own thoughts before this subject. He gazed at them, but saw them not. His pipe went out. Then he relighted it, wished the company 'good day' and went to his work.

"A very coorious-natured man," commented old Barkell; and Perryman shook his head.

"He've got what he wanted without a doubt, but how? He played foul and so all's said."

"There's a rod in pickle for the man, I do believe; an' if we could look at the bottom of his heart, we should see it there," answered Abner with fine mingling of metaphor. "The Lord be waiting His own good time to smite. Often I've knowed it happen so. Pierce's prosperity be the green bay tree. He's looking to his child; but for my part, if I had that on my conscience he's got, I should brace myself to a failure, an' think I was mighty well out of it if God spared the woman."

"Your God's a caution, father."

"A caution He may be, Richard," answered Mr. Barkell; "but He knows His Almighty business. An' He overlooks nought. See how Dodd Wolferstan be flourishing. The quality smiling on him, an' work coming in, an' every promise of ending his days a gentleman, if he only keeps his head an' don't forget himself with so much prosperity."

"Unlucky in love, lucky in life," said Dick.

"Ban't luck," corrected Mr. Perryman; "an' you oughtn't to use the word. He's a righteous, God-fearing chap, an' be getting no more than his proper reward. The Portreeve's a lesson to the rising generation, and specially to you—with your wild and damnable opinions."

"So he is," admitted the signalman. "I've learnt a lot from Wolferstan. As good a man as ever I met with."

"Pity you can't soak in a bit of his goodness then."

"I'll try, Ned. But Portreeve must be careful, you know. Success fools a man quicker than most things. Most men can stand ill fortune better than good."

"'Cause why? We get more practice," said old Barkell; and he laughed at his own joke.

"Haven't Wolferstan showed he can face all weathers?" asked Perryman. "Look at him! Didn't he come out of this jilting, like Daniel out of the den of lions, without a scratch?"

"Who knows that? We don't show all the scratches a woman can give us. Maybe his heart would tell. An' mark this, you old heroes; how do you know 'twas bad luck his losing her? Perhaps 'twas the best luck ever he had."

"Ban't no arguing with you," answered Ned. "Your ideas

will land you in very uncomfortable quarters some day. But I hope when you'm older you'll be wiser."

"I hope so too ; I'm always hoping it."

Mr. Perryman went onward ; Richard climbed to the bridge, crossed it and entered the signal-box where he pursued his life's labours ; and the ancient Barkell, having taken back his crockery to his cottage, returned to the viaduct and began trudging about as usual. Now he stood and solemnly gazed at this or that pier, now he scrambled up to the permanent way ; now he shouted directions to the workers ; now climbed a few rungs of a ladder ; now was nearly run over by a trolley laden with paint-pots. He wandered ceaselessly through the long afternoon, then quite wearied out, with cheering consciousness of responsible work well and truly done, returned to his home.

Westerly the evening light touched Meldon Viaduct, and it shone, like golden lace hung between the shoulders of the gorge.

CHAPTER IV

A GOOD DAY'S WORK

TO the eyes of Primrose Horn there lacked not signs that Wolferstan's regard increased, and that, in his own way, he began to find her more and more necessary. For his great deliberation she did not blame him, because it seemed very natural that he should decide slowly. A year in which to recover was nothing; meantime Dodd had told her that his Sunday dinners at Bowden were the first pleasure of his life; and she looked to it that they should continue so to be. In reality his friendship was mechanical and of the surface. His energies were fully absorbed in operations the reverse of love-making. It was not with any expectation of sharing the future with a woman that he toiled: indeed, his ambition had no definite goal. It was rather an elemental instinct, as the miser's inherent rule of conduct is to stint, the spendthrift's to squander.

Wolferstan enjoyed a part of Sunday at the farm, but his native energy called for no day of rest in every seven, and only changed its object. He worked very hard on Sunday and devoted more than a tithe of his working time to the doing of what he believed to be good. A large portion of the seventh day he applied to formulæ, worshipped thrice in public, read the lessons when asked to do so, and taught his class. His own secret devotions did not alter. He had made simple rules with himself and kept them. Prayer heartened him in his darkest hours and brought comfort, light, understanding, when most he stood in need of them. His spirit was evangelistic. Sometimes, indeed, he had debated the calling. But this idea—usually awakened by some eloquent sermon—arose but fitfully. He had preached to his boys and found himself not eloquent. He told himself that he would be more likely to build a church than minister in one.

It happened that for three successive Sundays the Portreeve's place at Bowden dinner table was laid in vain. Mr. Horn, who worshipped at Bridgetstowe, reported that Wolferstan was in church; but he had not spoken with him.

Upon the fourth Sunday the farmer did not leave home, and Primrose and her mother went instead. It was an impulse with Miss Horn, suddenly taken; and her appearance at St. Bridget's created a little mild interest, for she seldom came.

Wolferstan was already there in the capacity of a sidesman. Now he sat down beside her and shook hands. Then they spoke together in whispers.

"So glad to see you. I was coming to-day. May I?"

"Of course."

"I'm ashamed not to have written; but I've been that busy."

"Father'll be glad to see you. He's got some bothering letters from those Midland graziers. How smart you are!"

Dodd wore a black coat and waistcoat with grey trousers. His tie was light blue and he had a red rose in his button-hole.

"Come up higher, won't you? We've got a London gentleman preaching to-day."

"Are you going to read the lessons?"

"No."

"I'm sorry. Then we will stop where we are."

"I'm very glad to see you here—you know that."

"D'you remember your promise about the Wolferstan monuments? Really I came to see them. Can you show them to me after service?"

"Yes, if you don't mind stopping to the Sacrament."

"All right, I'll stop. Mother wants to, I believe."

"That's right. You say I'm smart—but you! You'll make a sensation. Those sweet-peas in your hat are like life."

"Point out your father's and mother's monument to me—the one you put up. Then I can look at it through the service."

He shook his head.

"Don't do that. The second lesson's my favourite chapter in the whole Bible."

A congregation began to come in; the bells chimed musically; Wolferstan rose and attended to his duties. She watched him and marked his courtesy to women. She felt a dull throb in her

breast, for he treated all alike and was civil, smiling, deferential to them as to her.

Orlando Slanning appeared with his mother. He was dressed in tweeds, showed no mark of the day in his attire, and conducted himself without reverence. She contrasted the sportsman and the Vicar's churchwarden, to the great advantage of the latter. Slanning tried to make her laugh and failed.

~~—~~Dodd did occupy the lectern after all, for the Vicar—an aged man—found himself in very bad voice and sent a message to Wolferstan after the first lesson. He read the first chapter of the Epistle of James, and Primrose Horn gave him her undivided attention.

"'But let patience have her perfect work,'" she thought. "Very good advice for me."

She yawned through the service and received the Sacrament. Then, after service had ended and the people were gone, Wolferstan showed Primrose and her mother the monuments.

They listened to him and followed his explanations concerning his family and the suspected links between it and the greater folk of the same name.

"History in these parts is full of such descents," he said. "By rights one labourer in ten among us is entitled to be called a yeoman, I believe."

"And you?"

"Well, I think, in all modesty, I'm a gentleman, Primrose; I do indeed."

"Technically as well as really."

"Yes—like those outside who have 'gent' on their gravestones. A hundred years ago they'd never dare to put 'gentleman' or 'esquire' on a tomb if it wasn't so."

"It really interests you?"

"Certainly it does."

"You've pieced together no more links?"

"Haven't had the time; but I confess I'm quicker to read my name in an old book than on a shop-front."

"That's not worthy of you."

"Maybe not. But my heart goes out to valour. Because I'm such a peaceful man myself, I suppose. The Wolferstans have done things. There's a ring to the name."

He started. Memory chimed on his last word and echoed

backward. He remembered that he had made exactly the same remark when, in the full glow and glory of love, he showed to Ilet these cenotaphs. Now his mind ran upon that vanished day, and he fell into abstraction. His eyes unconsciously turned to the pew where they had knelt together.

Meantime Mrs. Horn spoke.

"We must go now, or father won't know what's become of us."

Wolferstan did not hear and stood staring at his thoughts. Then Primrose touched his arm and he came to himself and conducted them from the church.

Outside Orlando Slanning was waiting for them. He advanced from a gloomy study of tombstones, scowled at Wolferstan unseen, then beamed upon them both when they caught sight of him. An ostler, from the 'Royal Oak,' walked the Bowden trap up and down in the road.

Slanning saluted Mrs. Horn with great courtesy; then he spoke to Dodd and said things for Primrose to hear.

"Ah, Wolferstan! the whole countryside envied you your luck when you rescued Miss Horn."

"Old history now, Mr. Slanning. But 'twas a blessing indeed. And she's none the worse, thank God."

"Save for that white line under her lower lip. You hadn't noticed it?"

"Can't say I had."

"Ah!"

Orlando uttered his ejaculation with unconcealed triumph. What were a man's eyes worth that had not marked and mourned that little livid dent on a lovely chin? No lover could have missed it. His tone conveyed as much to Primrose and she knew the thought in Orlando's mind. It made her cruel and she cut short the interview, helped her mother into the trap and mounted beside her. Then Wolferstan leapt up behind and they were gone. Slanning cursed the Portreeve and strode after his mother; Dodd talked to Mrs. Horn about the sermon they had heard.

It was now the turn of Primrose to grow abstracted, and she remained silent for some time. Her thoughts were with the accident in the past, and she debated certain questions she had often been tempted to put to Wolferstan. Their delicacy did not

deter her; but she knew that any reference to the subject, however personal, must necessarily turn Dodd's mind back, not only to the actual catastrophe, but also to all that sprang out of it. She could not speak before her mother, and so left the matter until they should be alone.

Mr. Horn was pleased to see his old bailiff.

"Lucky," he said. "Letters from they shine men. Left 'em open on the chance you'd come. Terrible shrewd they be, by the looks of it."

"Won't overreach us, however," declared Dodd cheerfully; and Mr. Horn smiled and shook his head at the inevitable Sunday sirloin.

While the others made a hearty meal, Mrs. Horn talked to her husband.

"Sorry you wasn't to church, father," she said. "A very good sermon upon faith. I wish Mr. Slanning would wear black of a Sunday. A coat is nothing, and yet—out of respect to his neighbours and his position, it should be done."

She sighed, like a gentle wind among winter sedges at water's brink.

"Do eat some more, mother," cried Primrose. "You don't take enough to keep a sparrow alive."

"I've done very well, my dear."

"I wish I could live on as little," answered her daughter. But her superb abundance of flesh shouted against the aspiration.

"The beautiful pink heather's all in bud again," said Mrs. Horn; "and as for the furze, 'tis a picture. I never saw it better."

"Too much by many an acre," declared the Portreeve. "We must have some big burning on North Dartmoor come next Spring. There's ten square mile I should like to see properly swaled."

"An' yet a fool here an' there can still be found to hold out against burning," replied the farmer. "Zanies! How be grass to grow 'pon top of a foot of furze needles, or through heather a yard high?"

"If you had your way, there'd be no beauty left on the earth, master," sighed Mrs. Horn.

"Beauty! Give me fatness—that's the properest beauty," he answered. "Round-barrelled beasts, round-cheeked children,

plump fruit an' potatoes. The earth's bursting with fatness, like the promised land; an' we let half of it run to waste."

"There!" laughed Dodd. "What a sermon! None can say no more you're a silent man after that, farmer. If we want to hear you talk henceforth, we shall know the text for you. 'Tis in Isaiah somewhere: 'And let your soul delight in fatness!'"

"So it do," confessed Mr. Horn. "As I got to middle ~~age~~ and the flesh crept over me, I felt my heart grow bigger and my mind was enlarged by it. It made me kinder and more generous like. I pity the lean beast and the lean man. 'Tis the shadow of starvation to see 'em."

"What about mother then?" asked Primrose.

Mr. Horn had finished, and now he rose and placed his great hand on the shoulder of his wife.

"Your dear shadow of a mother be the moon to my sun in a poetic manner of speaking—ban't you, Sophy? If I could only give you a trifle of three stun or so off my weight, I'd gladly do it."

"She's a skeleton at our feast of life," said Primrose.

"All the same, us must live in hope of clothing your bones some day, mother," continued Alexander Horn. "I'm sure your darter sets you a good example."

Mrs. Horn smiled and Primrose exclaimed with half pretended and half real indignation.

Presently, when Wolferstan had read the farmer's letter and pronounced it politic, he went into the garden with Miss Horn. To return to Bridgetstowe in time for his class, it was necessary that he should start almost immediately. Therefore she offered to walk part of the way with him. He thanked her and they set out together. Then she opened the matter in her thoughts.

"I've often wondered what happened during those dreadful moments when I was senseless and you thought I was dead. At the time of my accident I mean. What ever did I do? Did I speak—or anything?"

Nobody knew better than she the course of events. She felt his hand against her bosom still.

"There's nothing to tell about that," he answered. "It seemed an age till you showed me you weren't dead. Your

chin bled so badly. I was jolly thankful when at last you spoke."

"I *did* speak! Do you know I always had a horrid sort of idea I said something—like the memory of a bad dream when we wake miserable, but can't remember why. What did I say? But perhaps you've forgotten."

"A sort of instinct of self-preservation," replied Wolferstan vaguely. "You couldn't breathe properly."

"Did I say so?"

"Yes; you said you couldn't breathe, and that all was dark. I remember when you cried out that all was dark, I felt a good deal alarmed, because your eyes were wide open when you said it."

"I behaved like a fool. You'll never respect me again, I should think."

"How can you say that!"

She had brought the scene of the accident and his own operations very vividly before his mind. He remembered her impotence and her beauty. He recollected how she wept and clung to him on recovering consciousness. Her rare weakness then impressed him by contrast with her usual strength.

The Portreeve drew in his breath and made a little sound as though about to speak. Then, with a side glance, she surprised the sure thought on his face and in his eyes. He said no more, because he had passed on mentally to the sequel and his own tribulations. Yet she was interested to observe that memory kept him not long silent. He quickly recovered himself and spoke of other subjects in a mood placid and amiable.

"Don't you ever get tired of those noisy boys?" she asked him presently, when he mentioned his class of Sunday scholars.

"Never; they rest me rather. I like them and they like me."

"I loved being in church to-day," she suddenly announced.

"Not better than I liked seeing you there."

"And I liked hearing you read. I can understand that lesson pleasing you. You build your life upon it."

He showed considerable gratification. He also revealed astonishment, and she was quick to mark it, though unconsciously exhibited.

"You're surprised that I can be so serious-minded? You don't know me a bit really, though I suppose you think you do."

"Indeed not. I'm not so vain as to think anything of the

kind. I only know what you let me know, Primrose. You are much cleverer than I am."

"How absurd! What am I? A lonely, rather stupid woman."

"I wish there were more like you," he said. It was not a lover's sentiment, yet she appreciated the compliment.

"There are very few I care to please," she answered. "Yet I want to please you—always."

He felt a little sentimental as he looked into her eyes, ~~lifted~~ humbly to his. As they parted he shook her small hand with greater warmth than usual, and for a moment held it in his own. Then he left her rather abruptly, and she was subtly glad that he did not lift his hat. The unusual absence of this formality seemed to bring him to a more familiar closeness.

Hope soared up in her heart, and critically Miss Horn analysed the doings of the day, that she might judge the reason and measure the extent of this advance. There had come a hesitation into his voice, an abstraction of his manner, an unsteadiness to his eye. These things did not belong to his customary demeanour. She guessed her visit to St. Bridget's had pleased him; and she planned the future accordingly.

As for Wolferstan, the outward signs that she had marked upon him did not lack for inner causes. He knew that she was a beautiful and pleasant woman. He admired her qualities, believed that she was the very soul of fearless honesty, and knew that she loved him. She would be rich some day and her father much affected him. He had but to put out his hand and achieve the future mastership of Bowden if he pleased. But the very simplicity of the task turned him from it. He had wit to see that the temporal aspect of the case, while it was largely responsible for his emotions, yet did not really attract him. That the thought of Bowden should arise at all indicated the shadowy character of his own fancied affection for Primrose. He had never remembered that Ilet was penniless; why should he now never forget that this girl was rich? Yet he told himself that he felt a very real and tender friendship for Miss Horn.

So, by simple force of will, we ram home a falsehood against our own real knowledge, and make believe against belief—as children do. It is a power that survives infancy; for all men, by constant practice, daily reduce reason to implicit acceptance of the thing that is not. They diverge in one direction, or

A GOOD DAY'S WORK

155

in another, as the mind inclines and the lust tempts; they harmonize deviations with conscience according to their skill in self-deception; and justify them in the measure of their self-indulgence. None is wholly rational with himself, much less with the world.

CHAPTER V

THE MEETING OF THREE

NOW Ilet advanced into motherhood without fret or care, and no wild-flower passed more patiently, perfectly from bloom to bearing, than did she. The advice of Aunt Henny and other matrons was for the most part not taken, and her husband wasted his money in little delicacies unfamiliar and undesired. His wife's highest happiness was to be alone, and she read in the book of the Moor through many summer hours and found it content her. Reflection at this time was not always happy, but tended to hopefulness. Only one shadow clouded thought, when her mind fell upon the Portreeve. Him she had not met again since the remote day at Bowden Farm when, in anger, they parted; but now chance flung them together. Their meeting, however, was attended by a third person.

It happened that Ilet Pierce, on a day in late August, had leisure to pursue her own path and so sought the Moor, happy in the knowledge that she might spend many hours there.

Slowly and steadily she pressed upward, and a whim took her to the very crown of Devon. On the squat, rock mass of High Willhayes she stood poised with a fluttering robe—the woman by many feet nearest the sky in all the West Country. When her eyes had drunk the world outspread, she descended a little way, found a nook in the scattered stones, and settled there with some work that she had brought in a basket.

As a rare smile on a stern face, the glory of the ling touched Dartmoor and its expanses assumed an expression very gentle through the passage of autumn days. Yet, despite the transitory cheerfulness of earth and the lovely life of the desert around her, an inevitable message of awe lurked beneath, and its spirit was reflected in the mind of the woman with child. Ilet never failed to find this emotion here. It haunted the granite and was woven

in the texture of the waste. Where others in her case prayed to the later gods, she reposed within the pagan atmosphere of this loneliness and found it hearten and uplift.

The colour of the heather made darkness of morass and fen deeper by contrast, and the brightness thereof was a foil that enriched the chocolate-coloured earth, the seeding rushes, the glimmering bog, and the lichened stone. A far-flung foam of flowers fledged and feathered the great rocks; it climbed the boulders, sparkled from their clefts and cavities, and softened their outlines; it irradiated whole hillsides; illumined the ridges; shone against the darkness of cloud-shadows and, when itself enveloped by them, lent an inner tenderness of light to their passing purple. With scattered tufts, like jewels, it adorned the marsh edge and black peat cutting, in league on league, now massed, now scattered, it gladdened the great wastes, uttered the highest colour-song that Dartmoor knows, and made the hour a joy.

Ilet watched the warmth of westering sunshine slowly mellow the quality of the light and waken gentle roseate fires upon the darkness of the earth and in the brightness of the flowers that spread over it. Then suddenly there appeared before her Dodd Wolferstan and Primrose Horn. They had approached unseen and unheard; and now they came round a pile of rocks and stood within two yards of her. Colour leapt to the face of the Portreeve, and Ilet also, glowing hotly, rose to her feet. Only one of the party preserved self-possession and acted with common sense. There was no escape from the meeting and Primrose perceived it. Therefore she went forward with a smile, held out her hand and bade the other woman friendly greeting.

"Why, Mrs. Pierce! What a lonely place you've climbed to!" said she. "But, like us, you're a lover of the Moor. There's no such peace in the valleys."

As she spoke, Wolferstan regained presence of mind, and Ilet swiftly did the like.

"I often come here," she said. "'Tis a great place to think quietly."

"You're wise, but you must be careful of yourself. Mr. Wolferstan and I have been to Harter Farm about a pony. And it's a failure after all. Do you know anybody with a good one?"

Ilet shook her head. The man preserved silence. He was impressed by his companion's tact. She still did the talking, ran on brightly and showed tenderness and consideration for the other woman, which Dodd held to be very proper. Now the wife turned and spoke to Wolferstan.

"'Twas a great joy to us to hear tell of your good fortune," she said. "My husband and me both felt very glad about it."

"Thank you, thank you. People are a deal too kind to me."

"You deserve all the luck you get—an' more."

He allowed himself to look at her now. The remembered music of her voice affected him; he glanced sidelong for the dimple on her cheek he had kissed so often. It was there, and her teeth just made a flash of light between her lips as they were wont to do. Her face was bright though thinner. She looked pleasantly upon him, but did not smile in answer to the smiles of Miss Horn.

He was glad to go quickly. She shook hands with him when he left her, and he found his old resentment absolutely dead. He felt very kindly to her, and looked into her eyes, and was stirred by the old lovely colour, ripe and rich as a mountain stream in flood.

Primrose remained behind him a moment and he went out of earshot and lagged for her. Soon she regained his side, and then they proceeded without speech for a considerable distance.

Presently he burst out into praise.

"What a wonder you are—how amazing clever! Don't think I didn't mark it."

"Nonsense! I said nothing that any other woman would not have said."

"Much more. First there was the way you kept your nerve while she and I were that flustered. Then your skill of speech and swift gentleness. 'Twas done to give us time. She was quick to appreciate it, I'll swear."

"Don't talk about it. There are things one ought to mark inwardly and then pass without words. This is one."

"Women are so queer. Who would think now that once she and I——?"

"Leave it. No need to say these things to me."

"She's aged a thought in my eyes."

"She's had plenty to age her."

"And you could be so gentle and kind."

"Only pity—since you will go on about it," answered Primrose after a pause. She had weighed the word.

"Pity? There's nought to pity? It's the right and proper thing."

"How dense even you can be," she answered impatiently.

"Tisn't for that I pity her. I pity her in the fatherhood of her child, not the motherhood."

"Abel Pierce?"

"Think of it, and think of what might have been. A day-labourer's wife—joined to a lump of earth. Even the clods under our feet are better than such a man, for they have some light and loveliness hid in them: they blossom in their seasons. But think of being linked for life to a thing that never blossoms—that puts out no shadow of a flower from year's end to year's end—whose frozen soul knows no spring or summer—only winter always."

"Ignorance is winter, I suppose. 'Tis like your mother to hear you talk so poetical," he said.

"I feel mother in me sometimes when I am strongly moved," she answered. "Now, at least, you'll understand why I pity Ilet Pierce. She has a yokel; she might have had—you."

Her apparent immense and simple faith in him began to wear down the Portreeve's indifference. He was a warm-hearted man and could not fail to feel touched by declarations so fervid and ingenuous. He told himself that her love blinded her; that she failed to realize the frank nature of the things she said. He ascribed them to her straightforward spirit and felt such a fearless creature was worthy of great admiration. He set himself to take a higher and more serious view of her rare virtues. The truth of her he had never in his life glimpsed or guessed.

Her skill in the attack was supreme. Now maiden modesty and reserve met the requirement of the moment; now utterances almost childish in their simplicity fell upon his ear. When marriage was the matter, Primrose often argued humorously

against it; yet now, he had noted her conventional sentiment with regard to maternity and considered it highly correct.

Anon they parted, but not before Wolferstan had travelled a perceptible stage along the road she had opened for him. His admiration of the woman's qualities was genuine; yet it had no kinship with love. He knew that, since love he also had known. But he shut his eyes to the fact and began to speculate on his future—combined with the future of Bowden. And yet it was the old Ilet, of deep, slow voice and single-minded, narrow intensities, that filled his thoughts when that day was done. Her darkness came sharper against the gloom of night than the brightness of Primrose; his old lover, and not the huntress, went shadowy with him into the portals of sleep.

As for Ilet, she sat long after they had left her and with wet eyes watched the wonder of the sunset.

For her the voice of Primrose had meant less than the wind in the rushes; but his few words were precious to her. The physical sound of his voice woke no memory and the sight of him stung to no regret, for she had the faculty of shutting out the past and obliterating from the book of her mind its inner history of sufferings, fevers and tears. She lived steadfastly in the present and it required the incentive of her state even to make her look forward. But the thing spoken by Dodd tended to comfort her and she did not cry with sorrow. It was clear that he had returned to happiness and desired her also to be happy. That she should have met him with Primrose Horn also satisfied her conscience. It was surely significant of her own right action in the past. It helped to diminish her remaining concern and to affirm her in sure belief that, apart from details, she had acted wisely to give him up.

Ilet told her husband everything that night, and he too gathered satisfaction from the incident. Not indeed that he asked for any comfort. The past had long ceased to hold a pang for him. More completely than his wife he ignored it: and he lived now for the advent of his child and the good of its mother. Already he dreamed of feeling small hands in his beard, and pictured his own baby's little eyes blinking into his.

Miss Horn was wrong enough in her estimate of Pierce, and knew it; but even as a generalization she had uttered a falsehood, since there is no human spirit in which winter always reigns.

The flowers may be feeble or foul, but they are inevitably put forth; the fruit may prove ineffectual or poisonous, but it will surely be ripened. Seedtime and harvest are a part of conscious existence; and not the humblest who crawled through colourless days and went, already forgotten, down to his grave, but left the world other than he found it. The impress is beyond reach of discovery, not of proof.

CHAPTER VI

THE CHRISTENING PARTY

NEAR the end of that year Ilet's child was born, and another little Devon maid uttered her first wail by the ancient waters of Oke. Henny, critical in such matters, applauded all concerned, and her son became intoxicated with successful fatherhood. He lived for the child, almost as much as Ilet did; and his daughter was never absent from his mind. Great happiness reigned by the river, and pleasant arguments rose between mother and grandmother as to the name that their treasure should bear. But this matter Abel swiftly settled for them.

"'Twill be called after the both of 'e," he said.

"'Henny Ilet'! That won't never do," declared the elder Mrs. Pierce. "'Tis far too queer. 'Give a dog a bad name and hang him,' as the saying is."

"They'm beautiful names both," he answered, "an' 'Henny Ilet' 'twill be."

Thus indeed the child was baptized in fulness of time, and after the ceremony a little party met at the baby's home to celebrate the event.

The Barkells attended, and there came also Abel's cousins, John and Thomas Ball, with Ned Perryman and his granddaughter Jane.

A generous meal had been provided and, in the midst, was a cake. Across its surface, with white sugar, a baker artist had written the words, '*Henny Ilet—her christening cake.*'

This notable gift came from Mr. Abner Barkell and gave surprise and pleasure to the parents. Everybody managed somehow to squeeze into the parlour of Fishcombe Cottage and all

ate heartily. Mrs. Pierce did the waiting and Jane Perryman assisted her. Ilet sat in the place of honour with her baby in its cradle close at hand. The room lacked air and was very hot and stuffy after the fashion of the folk. A heavy odour of red herrings impregnated the atmosphere; the smell of pomatum from Johnny Ball's head was also perceptible; and moisture rose from steaming cups of tea. In the intervals between speech, came sound of hard breathing and steady munching. As the men finished, they loaded and lighted their pipes. Abel rose every few minutes to peep at his child, where she slept soundly after the exertions of the religious rite.

The time came for cutting the cake and Mr. Barkell proposed that the mother should perform that task.

"Christenings ban't what they were," he said. "'Tis passed off as lightly as teething nowadays; but when me an' Ned here were lads, 'twas remembered that a soul was saved at the church-vamp every time, and the matter treated accordingly."

"A lot of things be left out too, that were better to be done," said Perryman. "'Tis woman's work to bear them in mind. That's why they'm forgot, no doubt."

"You ban't over civil," declared Ilet. "Best to tell us, however, and brisk our memories. Trust us not to forget aught that's for our little one's good."

"'Tis too late for some precepts," answered Ned. "For instance, 'tis well known that there's no luck in telling a child's name afore it comes to the font. When parson axes for its name, then is the time the nation should know it, and not a day sooner. Yet everybody have been told what your li'l maid was to be called."

Pierce snorted, but there was concern as well as contempt in the sound.

"Moonshine!" he said; and Dicky, seeing his uneasiness, fostered it by pretending to side with Perryman.

"You say 'moonshine', Abel, but moonshine's only sunshine once removed, mind; an' Ned's nonsense may be only sense turned inside out."

"Surely nobody believes all that now?" asked Tommy Ball.

"Yes, they do," answered Ned. "Those that have proved the truth of it believe it. Didn't Saul Heathman's mother tell his

name to my wife two days afore the infant was christened, and wasn't Saul Heathman hung in '91 for killing his mate on the railway?"

"Another thing," cried Abner, "you mind an' not cut the child's nails or her hair, Ilet, till she'm up home a year old. If her nails call for shortening, you must bite 'em with your teeth."

"Who don't know that?" asked Henny. "Teach your gran'-mother!"

But old Barkell had much else to say.

"An' if there's a kitten in the house, it must be drowned or got rids of," he continued. "'Tis awful bad luck to have a chet an' a new-born child brought up together."

"In other points I'm very well satisfied with the day's work, however," continued Perryman. "Look how the infant yowled an' roared when the water touched her. You could 'most see the sin of Adam going forth neck and crop. That's all to the good. I never heard a tender babe make more row."

Abner nodded.

"Yes; an' there was only her done. I hate to see a string of 'em crossed wi' the same water. Each child did ought to have a separate drop, an' 'tis laziness to do otherwise."

"Why do it matter?" asked Johnny Ball, who was a serious-minded youth. "I don't say it don't matter," he added hastily, "for I'm a great man for the mysteries. I only ax why."

"That reminds me," replied Mr. Perryman, without answering the young painter's question. "I'm sorry for your own sake, John Ball, that you've took over the duties and gravities of godfather. Ban't a very witty thing for a bachelor to do."

"Why not then?" asked the young man rather warmly. "Ban't I equal to it? Don't I believe it all—an' more?"

"There's nought too hard for you to believe, is there, John?" asked the signalman placidly.

"Nought," answered Johnny. "There's nobody to Okehamp-ton with a greater gift of believing."

"'Tisn't that; I'm only sorry for you. Them as come to be godfathers, very often come to nothing else. 'First to font, last to altar', is a very ancient saying, an' 'tis not often out."

"Then what about your own grand-daughter, as stands for a godmother?" asked Tommy Ball.

"I warned her," answered Perryman; "but she'm like Dicky here, brought up on the board school—don't know an' won't larn."

The increasing smoke reached the baby's nostrils and Henny Het coughed and cried.

• Her mother caught her up and prepared to take her away.

• "Let's have a look," said Abner. "Can't say as I've properly seed the cheel yet."

His wrinkled neck bent over the baby and his aged eyes beamed upon it.

"A proper li'l fairy. But so much depends on the noses of 'em. You may 'most say a babby's born without a nose. The organ comes forward—for good or ill—in after life."

"Don't that tempt you, Dicky?" asked Mrs. Pierce as the younger Barkell gazed upon her grandchild. "Don't the sight of that bud make you want a wife an' such another?"

Richard held his little finger to the heroine of the hour, and her triangular mouth closed upon it. Then she perceived her mistake and wept. The mother and child disappeared; the smoke increased in density.

"No," said Dicky. "No, ma'am; there's nothing of the father in me. Not but what I believe in babbies with all my heart. I'd trust 'em further than their parents 'most always, and I'd back 'em to run the show, when we go under, a lot better than we have. But as to breeding 'em and bringing 'em up to be worth their salt, 'tis skilled labour—or should be. You wants a particular build of mind to be a parent, and I've not got it."

"'Tis lucky your father didn't think the same. I suppose you're not sorry you're born yourself?" asked Tommy Ball.

"Not at all. To be alive is the first step certainly. But 'tis a very hoodwinking business, the getting of childer. Us don't have 'em because we love 'em, but because we love their mothers. 'Tis all a trick of nature."

"Nature ban't going to catch you then?" asked Jane Perryman.

"No, Jane—she don't want to. The pinch of salt was left out when I was stirring. I know well that human creatures bear us bachelor-men a grudge; yet we've our uses."

"They'm a regular ordained order of beings, no doubt,"

admitted Mrs. Pierce—"same as spinsters. It takes all sorts to make a world."

She brought out a bottle of spirits, and Mr. Barkell the elder rallied Abel, who had just quietly returned from a visit to his wife's chamber.

"What a man! Can't keep his eyes off his offspring even for a party of neighbours!"

"Looketh all in a miz-maze of wonder about it still," said Tommy Ball.

"So he be," answered Abel's mother. "My boy—there, 'tis life to him."

Suddenly John Ball spoke in his solemn voice.

"'Tis a great power to have a hand in the next generation, surely. For my part, to say it in a Christian spirit, I'd 'most think that getting a babby was as serious as christening of it."

"Don't you tell parson that, or he'll score it against you, John," said his brother.

"Of course he would," declared Abner. "And right he'd be. To bring a child in the world is no more than simple nature. The cleverness of the contrivance ban't ours, but Almighty God's. You might so well say 'twas a clever thing to turn a handle of one of they hurdy-gurdies an' play a tune. Any fool can do it. The clever man was him as invented the invention."

"Good sense that," assented old Perryman. "To get a cheel be only to double yourself. A grain of corn's cleverer still. For it gives you fifty for one."

"Getting a child isn't doubling yourself, Ned," said Dicky Barkell. "'Tis halving yourself; 'tis lessening yourself by so much. A man once a father may be so much the greater in his own eyes, but he's so much the less in nature's. For why? To breed be to do what nature's set on your doing. After that you'm no more to her than the old apple tree past bearing. Having played her game, you can go an' shoot yourself for all she cares."

His father's eyes twinkled.

"Now we'm coming to the secret then," he said. "Dicky here won't marry for fear as nature should forget him after!"

"Nature be like the Lord in that respect," said John Ball. "It says 'Suffer the little children to come unto me'."

Well spoken, Johnny," answered Mrs. Pierce with shining eyes. "'Tis very well put, I'm sure; an' true as can be. Nature will do 'most anything in reason for the little dears, an' get 'em out of their troubles again an' again."

"Wi' a good doctor's help," said Dicky. "If they only have Doctor Hext an' nature 'pon their side—there's hope for 'em."

"But 't ban't so afterwards," declared Mr. Perryman, conscious of age. "That's where the Lord's ahead of nature, no doubt. He don't turn from us when we begin to go downhill—too large-minded for that."

"Nature's the slave of childer an' the cruel taskmaster of your old blids," said Dicky. "As for us in the middle time, I suppose it rests wi' ourselves which she shall be. Obedience is the thing. She rewards it. Look at my old man here with the whip lashing his bones. 'Tis the beer he's drunk—oceans of beer, though of course he'll tell you different."

"Nothing of the sort," said Abner. "Beer ban't no more to me than a seemly joy. I've never abused it. What I feel in my bones is only nature getting in the thin end of the wedge. 'Tis planted in us all, an' she just waits her own time to drive it home an' split the spirit from the carcass. Why, that babby in the chamber over—death's in her. She've got to come to it, though her little feet will run above our dust for many years first, no doubt."

"A very mournful thought for a christening, anyway," said Tommy Ball. "Best leave that an' drink some more gin, Mr. Barkell."

"He ban't digesting them dough-nuts, else he'd take a hopefuller view," suggested Jane Perryman.

"As to that, my dears, often the wisest words come from an uneasy stomach," replied Abner. "Last vicar afore this one actually told his housekeeper that he never preached so well as when in the doctor's hands. The world's full of mystery, an' a lot be brought down to digestion that belongs to principalities an' powers, if we could only see beyond the veil."

"There's always God behind every hedge," summed up Mr. Perryman.

"A very proper thought, Ned," said Henny Pierce: "an' now

I'll be asking some of you men to get going, for the smoke's settling on the dresser."

Then they began slowly to take their leave; and none departed without a kind word and a cheerful hope that the infant now admitted into the ranks of the faithful, might enjoy length of days and gladden the hearts of her parents through many years to come.

CHAPTER VII

A MESSAGE

MRS. HORN ventured mildly to protest at this season and hint that her brilliant daughter occupied too large a portion of Dodd Wolferstan's leisure. But Primrose passed the matter lightly off. "Since it is his leisure I occupy, you need not be troubled," she said. "Time enough to talk when he comes to me instead of his business."

The woman very correctly divined Dodd's attitude, and knew nearly as well as he did himself the process of his mind. She had learned him thoroughly, and therefore found patience not difficult. She suspected that he had fixed a definite date for the solemn business of proposal, and guessed that after the church's fast of Lent was ended and Easter come, he would approach her. Herein she erred from over-subtlety. The Portreeve had set himself no limits and put no exercise upon his control. Had he felt any special, ardent hunger to possess Primrose, it is possible that he might have subjected his soul to discipline; but utmost calm, if not indifference, marked his attitude.

She came to church pretty often through the winter and read a religious book or two that he lent her. But in the matter of conduct she was always reasonably honest with him, and he knew that she neither felt so deeply nor was actuated by such high motives as himself. From that standpoint she often reminded him of his first love; for Ilet had never pretended to much devoutness of mind and always preferred a country ramble before a church service, when he gave her choice.

There came a rough afternoon in late March when Wolferstan was at Bowden to visit the folds with Mr. Horn. Over wind-blown leas he had tramped and inspected great wealth of new-born

bleating things, where on slopes at spinney-side and under low hedges they cried in the cold sunlight. Earth had again awakened and now moved to the lifting sun and music of birds. And where her coverlet was thrown aside, it shone and sparkled with many buds and many wings; with the silver of the willows and the running, laughing fire of the celandines; with the interlaced and flashing flight of birds and the rosy inflorescence of the elm. Spring haunted holt and fold and growing nest; spread flowers for the feet of the young year; moved incarnate in the shape of each little country maiden, who lifted wondering eyes to trace the shrill lark's spiral on the pale blue sky.

Alexander Horn and the Portreeve walked together, visited a great field and surveyed the hope and promise of the time. In a corner of the croft stood a small, wooden house upon wheels. It held the shepherd and his appliances. Beneath it in a barrel on litter of hay were three lambs that had come at a birth and slain the mother. The little things were being brought up by hand. The shepherd warmed their milk, then thrust a piece of flannel in the mouth of the bottle and gave each in turn the improvised teat. They were three days old and gaining strength rapidly.

"I takes 'em in the hut with me of a night, because warmth be as much as food to 'em," explained the shepherd. He was a middle-aged man deeply versed in the lore of flocks, but blank of mind respecting other matters.

"What a year for twins it is!" said Wolferstan. "But one seldom hears of a ewe coming to harm. What went amiss, shepherd?"

The labourer stooped and flung a stone at a terrier that was scratching at the grave of the dead mother; then he shook his head.

"Can't tell you, Portreeve—no more than I can tell you why the lambs always twinkle their tails when they suck. Maybe she was a thought too fat for her work, though I don't think it. But there 'tis: her time had come. 'Tis one life for three."

"You must get 'em into clean pasture," said Mr. Horn, regarding the scene doubtfully. "It's time they were out of this."

"Only waiting for the wind to go from the east. Then us'll up-along to 'ten-acre'."

"Improved Leicesters," said the farmer as he gazed upon his sheep. "'Improved' improved Leicesters, if I may say it."

"Don't seem to have no heads at all," declared Dodd with admiration. "A beautiful beast without a doubt."

"A sheep only wants his head for eating with," explained Alexander Horn. "If us could breed away everything but his limbs and body and mouth, 'twould be a noble feat."

"Have 'e heard tell about they early-yeaning Darsets?" asked the shepherd. "'Twould be a peart thing to have lambs for market ahead of all the countryside."

"Let 'em stop in Darset for me," answered his master. "They black-faced Lammermuirs even I shan't keep. Flesh and hair alike ban't to be named alongside these here."

"They'm so hardy as ponies, however," answered the shepherd.

"An' that's all you can say for 'em," concluded Mr. Horn.

They inspected the food of the nursing ewes and the pens specially erected for their sleeping quarters. Each beast had her own little separate stall, large enough to accommodate mother and lambs by night.

Presently they left the folds and visited certain water-meadows soon to receive the sheep on their rich grasses. And then they returned to the farm, while Wolferstan made a suggestion or two as they went. His great deference always pleased his companion; but the farmer generally drove Dodd to speak his mind, because he knew the Portreeve was practical and kept abreast of the times. Wolferstan, indeed, took no little toil off the elder man's shoulders, for Mr. Horn grew unwieldy, and long journeys and strange beds were a labour and grief to him.

Primrose approached them presently, and her father, who had of late been unusually impressed with his former bailiff's value, permitted himself some reflections at sight of her.

"I wish to God you was my son-in-law, Portreeve. An' I say it out, though I never met any other man I'd care to father."

"'Tis like your great goodness, Mr. Horn. But you've always rated me a deal too high."

"It could be done—nought easier—if——"

Dodd saw the farmer's eye on his daughter.

"I'm not good enough for her," he said.

"Stuff! You're built for her—made for a pair. An' I wish I could see you harnessed."

Wolferstan did not answer, for Primrose was now within ear-shot. She joined them and showed pleasure that he was coming in to tea at Bowden. Near the farmyard Mr. Horn left them together and, moved by some vague thought, the Portreeve suggested that they should go and see her flower-garden. It rained suddenly and sharply in the manner of March, and presently they went into the summer-house for shelter. At the entrance she stooped to the border and picked her name-flower.

"Put them in my button-hole," he said, and she marked the constrained note of his voice.

She cast a swift glance at the face of the farm, lest unseen eyes might be upon them, then went into the summer-house. The wind rose with the rain-storm and the hour was dark.

Sitting beside him, she lent across his breast and obeyed him. Her hands shook and he saw that they did. She was long about her task and he had leisure to note the creamy beauty of her skin and the loveliness of her ear opposite his eyes. Her body was close to him ; her mouth was just open ; her hair touched his face and its faint odour reached his nostrils. He was fired swiftly ; the passion in him leapt along every nerve. He folded her up in his arms, pressed her close, kissed her ear and her neck and her cheek. She shut her eyes and let him kiss. Then the flowers fell from her hand, her arms went round his neck and fiercely she kissed him back.

"At last you love me," she said.

"Who on God's earth could help it?" he asked.

Victory shook the woman in her and turned her to water. She shivered, put her head on his breast and began to cry with hard, tearless sobs.

He was going to speak and ask her to be his wife, when a maiden came running from the house and the lovers separated.

"Go—I can't," said Primrose ; and Wolferstan rose and went down the garden path to meet the girl.

She spoke before he had time to ask her errand.

"'Tis a man comed for you, Mr. Portreeve. A railway-man as have runned all the way from Meldon Viaduct. Can't catch his wind yet. Harm have happened and your name's named, if you please."

"I'll come," said Dodd. "Tell him to wait for a while. I'll be at the house in a few minutes."

He was turning to the summer-house when another figure appeared from the farm and Dicky Barkell hastily approached. He still panted with his unusual haste.

"What luck!" he said. "I somehow thought you might be here and ran for it on the chance."

• "You to run! Has the sky fallen?"

"No; but a hundred tons of the shillet* at Meldon quarry have. Hope they'll excuse me for pushing in here; but 'tis life or death—a question of minutes."

"No harm to Mr. Barkell?"

"No, no—an accident at the quarry—a man crushed and wants you. You'll be too late even now very like. But his peace hangs on seeing you. He prayed to send for you."

The Portreeve shouted to the unseen woman in the summer-house.

"A bad accident and I'm wanted this moment, Miss Horn. Man may be dying. I'll come back later—tell your father, please."

Primrose did not answer and he left the farm with Barkell.

"I'm spent," said Dicky. "I've run a mile an' a half without stopping, I should think."

"Who is it? Who wants me and where? Let me know that an' I'll push forward."

"'Twill be a race with death. Abel Pierce is the unlucky one. Stuff came down sudden an' buried him pretty near to his neck. They've took him home. He was awful pinched in his soft parts, poor chap."

"But what have I——?"

"He axed for you. When they dug him out, he said he was going to die for certain, an' axed for you thrice. I was going home-along an' heard. Nobody else heeded; but knowing what I know, I guessed the rest. What sent me to Bowden I can't tell you, Portreeve. Just a sort of half hope you might be there. But I little thought to have had the good luck to find you."

"'Luck'! You can say that, Dick?"

"I don't know any other name for it. But I'll call back the word all the same, for no man knows whether 'twas good luck or bad till we see what comes of it."

* *Shillet*—shale.

"He'll be alive an' I shall see him, Richard. Thank God—I know what he's going to say to me."

The other nodded.

"If he's to die, he'll die easier for telling you; if he's to live——"

"He'll live easier: be sure of that. I can forgive him."

"Of course. I was thinking of his wife."

"She need never know."

"She'll guess he didn't want you for fun at a time like this. But it won't clear matters our talking about it. Go you down over the hill and you'll get to the cottage in ten minutes."

"Right. This be the best day's work ever you did, Dick."

"I hope so, I'm sure."

The Portreeve started to run and went forward at a steady trot.

CHAPTER VIII

ONE TRAVELLER RETURNS

THE wind stormed at Wolferstan as he ran, and rain swept the blind face of South Down where he hastily descended among its furze brakes and littered stones. Presently he crossed Oke and reached the cottage of the Pierces.

Within the home a moment of peace had followed upon the catastrophe. A young medical man had done what he could and then departed, promising shortly to return. The full nature of the mischief he did not as yet perceive, and he had left wife and mother with the shadow of hope. Only Abel himself felt the truth and believed that he must die. He had remained insensible for some time after sending the urgent message for Wolferstan; but he was now quite conscious.

He lay breathing hard and in great pain. His wife sat beside him with his hand in hers. His mother stirred in the chamber and kept talking hopefully.

"He'm coming back so soon as ever he can," she said. "And he'm going to call at the surgery an' bring a comfort or two along with him. And, please God, there'll be no need for you to go in the hospital; as why for should 'e, with a wife an' mother both to look after 'e?"

"Where's the baby to?" he asked. "Bring her along to me all you can. I mayn't see her much more."

Ilet fetched the child. It was sound asleep and she put it beside him.

"The only thing as will believe in me after to-day," he said.

"You mustn't talk so," his wife answered.

"Wait till the man comes. 'Tis years since that ground gave way. . . . To tell it while I've got power to speak. . . . How clear it all comes again, though I thought 'twas forgot. . . .

Everything back in my mind to the least. . . . Why ban't he here?"

"He'm on the way without a doubt."

"Never tell she," he said, looking at his child. He turned his neck to get a better view and groaned. "Done for—done for," he said.

Henny brought him some drink, but he shook his head.

"I can't let it down."

Ilet noticed a change in his colour and a difference in the sound of his breathing.

"Be you in pain?" she asked.

"Not much, dear. My right side's dead already, I reckon. How the wind howls in the chimney—like a drunken man."

"Us would put a fire, but it smokes so."

The child opened her little eyes, clenched her fists and yawned.

"You believe in me—the only living thing as will after I'm gone. Never tell her I was a lying rascal—never tell——"

He stopped.

"Don't 'e talk that silly nonsense, darling Abel," implored his wife. "Wait quiet till he comes. Sit down, mother, can't 'e? Why for do you want to flutter about so?"

Silence fell. Henny came and knelt by the bed. Then the wind shouted and the old carpet seemed to breathe laboriously, like the man.

"You must face it. It's got to be," he said presently. "Don't fret too much—neither of you. You've got this dear li'l thing—mine. Let me see you feed her, Ilet. 'Tis the sight I love best, after you two women's faces."

She obeyed him, and he turned his head slowly to watch the small fat hands kneading his wife's breast and the little mouth sucking.

For a few moments the sight made him forget himself; then agony brought him back.

"God! I hope it ban't going to be a long job," he murmured. "I feel like half fire, half frost."

There was a knock at the cottage door, and Henny went out hastily to answer it. A moment later she accosted Dodd Wolferstan at the ope-way.

"Look here," she said with a swift, shaking voice, "list to me,

will 'e? My son—he thinks he'm struck for death, but well we know he ban't. But he's wandering, and don't know what he says. He's burning to tell you some stuff against himself—to confess to you, Mr. Portreeve. Don't you be hard—for my sake—for his mother's sake—don't be hard on him now."

"I hope and trust 'tis not so bad as they say."

"Bad enough, but he'll come through it. Doctor said 'twas too soon to call him a dead man."

"Will he see me? Is he in a case to do it?"

She hesitated and longed to say 'no'; but she dared not.

"You must see him for his peace; I know 'tis right you should. Doctor's coming again with comforts presently. For God's sake be kind to him. Don't judge him—a fallen man. You'm such a famous Christian: don't let your heart be hard against my poor boy."

"No need to say such things. Who am I to judge any but myself?"

"Remember he reckons he's dying. Never bring up what he says after, Mr. Portreeve—when he's well again."

"Don't fear it. Live or die, he'll be a happier man for telling me. And what he says will be sacred."

"Will you soar up even to forgiving him? 'Twill be a blessed thing if you can."

"Forgive him—yes."

Ilet entered, gave her child to the grandmother and beckoned Dodd.

"Come," she said. "What he've got to say must be heard by you an' me only. 'Tis his whim the child shouldn't be in the room."

Wolferstan followed her to the parlour where Abel lay, and Mrs. Pierce remained in the kitchen.

At the door Ilet turned.

"I thank you with all my heart for coming so quick. My husband's very bad, Mr. Wolferstan. Half dead a'ready, he fears."

"'Tis the shock. I hope an' pray he'll be spared."

"I don't think so. But you'll say nought to lessen his chance of getting through?"

"Can you ask it?"

"You'll be gentle—I well know that."

"Surely, Ilet."

She opened the door and brought him in.

"Here's Mr. Wolferstan come hot-foot to do your bidding, my dear."

"Be hopeful, Pierce," said Dodd. "I do trust with all my heart you're going to come through this trial."

He put his hand down to Abel's and pressed it.

"Ess—I shall come through. Death's no great evil for the man that dies. 'Tis them left behind. . . . Look at her—my wife—as ought to be your wife. I've got God to tackle afore along, an' don't want to make it worse than 'tis. Can you forgive me—you an' her? I kept you apart . . . lied, tricked, blinded both of you. . . . 'Twas my anointed wickedness to plot an' plan it. Full of guile I was—quickened by love of her. . . . Clever as a snake. Love makes a man cunning. . . . I foxed you fifty times . . . blackened your name . . . jumped at every chance to do it. Can't make myself out worse than I be. But I know you'm a blameless man, Portreeve, an' I always knowed it, though I pretended with myself you wasn't."

"Rest a bit, my dear soul, and hear me," said Wolferstan. "Love be stronger than any mortal thing, seemingly. A man in love's worse than one in liquor, for his wits don't grow dull. 'Tis his conscience, not his brains, goes drunken. You done what a many have afore an' will again. I forgive you, Abel Pierce, with all my heart—as I hope I'll be forgiven for my own many sins."

His wife ministered to the stricken man's torment as best she could.

"An' you—you, Ilet?" he asked. "'Twas the love I bore to you—I couldn't help it. If the time comed again, I'd do the same. Here on the edge of the pit I say it."

His wife held his hand.

"'Tis all forgiven—all," said Wolferstan.

"I'll know that by night. There's God. . . . Never you tell her—swear by your hope of heaven you'll never tell my darter come she grows up."

"I swear I never will."

"That's all then. Go now. Thank you for forgiving me."

Dodd touched his hand and was going to take Ilet's, but native delicacy stopped him and he ignored her.

"God support you," he said to Pierce, "an' may He bring you

from death back to life again. But if 'tis His will you go home, rest easy: what a man can do for those you leave behind, that shall be done."

Abel listened greedily and nodded.

"Do it. 'Twill put you high in heaven when your turn comes."

• Then the Portreeve went out and appeared not to notice Ilet as he did so.

"Be a Christian," said Abel earnestly and suddenly. "Be a working Christian after I'm away. An' bring up the cheel so. See what it makes of yon man. Promise, Ilet."

"Ess, I will, darling."

"An' say 'I forgive you, Abel'."

"I forgive you with all my heart an' soul, dear, dear Abel."

"You know why I done it—for worship of you."

"I know."

The doctor returned a few moments later; and with him came an elder practitioner whom he had met on the road. Mr. Hext knew the family and had brought Ilet's daughter into the world.

The wife went away and left them with her husband. She and her mother-in-law sat and waited in the kitchen. Once Abel shouted under examination, and Ilet's blood froze; but the mother encouraged her.

"Shows the life that's there," said Henny. "A man as can holier so, be far ways off death surely."

Interminable minutes passed. A fever of restlessness took them. Sometimes one, sometimes the other crept to the parlour door, then crept back again.

At last the physicians appeared and told them their man must die and swiftly. The younger prepared to hasten for drugs to lessen his pain. That he undertook to return with them himself was a sort of comfort to Henny.

They departed together and the mother went back to her son.

"Bear up," he said. "I knowed what they'd got to tell me. They'll send stuff to help me off easy. Where's my baby to? Put her close—close."

Ilet brought the child to him.

"Don't leave her till I be cold," he said; "but let her bide so long as her will——"

Outside, the doctors went through the stormy skirts of night. Both were mounted, and now they had some ado to pick their way through the rough valley. The younger was recently qualified and revealed an emotional nature.

"Their hungry eyes!" he said; "their dumb, imploring silence. It's hard to give a stone to those that pray for bread." How the proudest sort of men, when lives are in the balance, will grovel to the doctor."

"Don't talk—ride on as fast as you dare, and get the morphia," answered Mr. Hext.

Abel's mother seemed unable to accept what she had heard. She sat by her son and stared at him.

"Bear up," he said again. "'Tis all right. My thread's spun."

"Yes—yes—I be bearing up. Don't you talk. Keep your strength all you know. Doctors is often wrong."

He was silent and this made her nervous. An awful doubt came upon her that she would never hear his voice again. She plotted in her mind to make him speak, just once. His eyes were shut. The baby nestled by him awake and happy. Presently she slept again. His hand moved, where he was fondling her little feet.

"Try to sleep," said Henny.

He did not answer and a frenzied fear grew that he would answer no more.

"Say 'good night' afore you sleep, my darling boy," she implored him.

"Good night, mother. . . . Ilet, good night . . . no pain now . . . good . . ."

Within half an hour he passed without a pang. A tremor overtook him; his limbs extended; his head rolled to one side; and as he died, he smiled.

"He's gone—your son be at peace, dear mother," said Ilet.

Sleep and Death lay in the bed together.

The mother got up and kissed him.

"Gone—his soul, like a homing pigeon, back to his father an' his God," she said.

In the valley came the sound of the wind and a galloping horse.

Henny stared and did nothing. Wild dance of huddled thoughts played in the corridors of her brain ; links were broken ; synthesis of ideas became impossible. She could by no means reflect coherently, or measure the thing that this black hour had brought. Her intellect was strained and jolted out of gear. It leapt backward ; then jumped forward far beyond the present.

Out of the storm came the young doctor hurriedly. He was soaked with rain.

"How is your good man—pretty quiet?" he asked Ilet.

She got up from her knees beside the couch.

"Yes, thank you, sir," she said. "He's gone."

One of Henny Pierce's rare smiles, that seemed to work to the surface of her countenance slowly from the depths, now spread upon her ancient face. She turned to the dead man.

"My dandy-go-risset gown's wore out these many days, dear heart," she said. "'Twas time I had another."

CHAPTER IX

LIGHT ON A PROBLEM

IT was not until three days after the funeral that Dodd Wolferstan again visited Bowden. Primrose Horn was out, and another week elapsed before he saw her. Then she was interested to find that he did not pursue the subject of their last conversation, or resume that most significant scene where chance broke it off. Interested she was, but not astonished: his absence had indicated the possibility of delay. Now he seemed unable to discuss anything but the recent death. Primrose gathered that Abel Pierce had made a confession to the Portreeve before he died; and she felt deeply concerned to learn the purport of it. When Dodd stayed away, her first thought was that the labourer had told him all; when he returned, she could but doubt it. The matter presently rose between them; but Wolferstan only stated that Pierce had done wrong in the past and that he had confessed and repented of it before his end. The nature of his errors and the names of those who might have suffered therefrom, she did not hear. She angled for particulars, and, when she exclaimed at the incident, and declared that a man of the stamp of Pierce must have had an accomplice in any considerable and successful wrong-doing, he told her explicitly that Abel had named none.

She sent a wreath of flowers to the funeral and occupied her mind with the new problems. If, indeed, her name had not transpired, why was it that Dodd Wolferstan did not return on the very night of the accident as he had promised to do? With intuition that sickened her, she came at the reason.

And while she waited to see him pick up the threads, the Portreeve hesitated and suffered. Great fundamental facts faced him. He looked ahead, and he looked into his heart.

With the company of the mourners and Ilet herself he had attended the funeral of Abel Pierce ; and he had gone home with the widow afterwards. They did not drive from the little graveyard of Sourton, where Pierce was laid beside his father, but, at Ilet's wish, walked back over the Moor, then crossed Oke and so approached Fishcombe Cottage. Henny could not attend the burial. She became light-headed and irresponsible. An old woman from Okehampton looked after her and her granddaughter until the widow returned.

While they walked together, Ilet spoke to Dodd and asked him to forgive her, as he had forgiven her husband. Such words were unnecessary between them, and he begged her to be practical.

"We can talk of the past another time, if you like to do so," he said. "Just now let me play a friend's part, and trust me, and talk of the future. If old Mrs. Pierce is going to get tootling, she must be put away."

"Never ! 'Tis but a passing cloud, Doctor says. She'll come to herself presently. 'Twas the awful shock. I know well enough how she felt and feels yet. I was mad myself the night he died—had to hold my hands over my mouth to keep from screaming like an animal."

"There's not a soul but feels sorrow for you all."

"'Tis a very terrible thing. I loved him so dearly. A good husband—a wonnerful husband, I should think."

"You haven't thought about what you're going to do?"

"Not yet. I can't leave the little one. Nought else matters—except his old mother. One of the last things he said to me, when she went down-house to let you in that night, was that I must always be a good darter to her. And I shall be."

"Trust you for that. You must have somebody to pour yourself out upon. Love's food to you. Now he's taken, 'twill be the child and his mother."

She nodded slowly.

He admired her calm courage under suffering and knew that she had endured great griefs bravely. He wondered whether her husband's confession had served to diminish for her the agony of his death ; but he much doubted it. Once, long ago, she had told him that nothing she loved could do wrong in her eyes ; and he had reproved her for such narrow seeing. Now he

remembered it. He speculated also as to whether she had thought of him and the things that must be moving in his mind after he left Abel Pierce. It struck him that this side of the event had not yet arisen before Ilet. It would take time before she could remember that ; yet, even at this stage in her widowhood, while yet the earth scarcely hid her husband's coffin, Wolferstan vaguely hoped that Ilet would presently picture his side, and weigh it, and remember how this confession from the past must have sounded in his ear.

Hourly he found himself more interested in her state. After the first shock, he received the changed situation with growing excitement. Each morning it rose uppermost in his mind, and constantly he found his footsteps leading to the glen where she lived. His thoughts haunted Fishcombe Cottage and made excuses to carry his body thither. His attitude amazed himself. It had not been assumed gradually ; it had not developed by slow stages as a result of this death and sudden change ; but it had burst out, like a banked fire blown upon. He was bewildered to find, alive and awake, an emotion that he supposed long dead. Ilet appeared to have returned into his existence after sojourn in another world. She had come to life again. He had thought no more of her while she was Pierce's wife ; she had left his mind empty to pursue its destined aims ; but, as a widow, she became to him Ilet once more. Soon even the fact of her widowed state ceased to intrude upon the position. She was merely Ilet. Before the autumn she had become a maiden again in his heart, and he found himself loving her as he had loved her, and longing for her, even as he had longed.

But storms swept the man's soul before he reached this point, and he fought more than one battle with conscience. These struggles daily renewed brought dryness of spirit and weariness, fear of himself, distrust and distemper of mind. Yet not all the light of his steadfast faith was strong enough to show him whether, touching these conflicts, he had won or lost.

His spiritual sense, firmly educated in the Christian ethic, smote him at the height of his new and rapturous hope, and turned his mind immovably upon the business of that hour when Richard Barkell ran, and found him, and brought to him the last message of Abel Pierce.

The memory of Barkell took him to the man ; but he passed

through periods of sharp self-contempt before he went. It seemed that he was living again through those weeks of torment before Ilet finally turned from him. His own irresolution frightened him, and the failure of religion clearly to light the way rendered him uneasy. To find himself—a man so swift and resolute in his dealings—thus reduced to impotence before this problem, quite bewildered his spirit. The matter was one for conscience alone. He stood between two women; and one he knew loved him well, while the other with his whole heart and soul he loved. But was it possible to withdraw honourably from Primrose? He remembered very vividly his conduct. He knew that all things had thrust him to her; he blushed under the darkness of night to think that his blood had grown hot at the smell of her hair. He was debased in his own eyes and ashamed of the healthy but animal passion she had awakened. Could he marry her now that the fire she had lighted was cold and beyond power of further flame? He abased himself in secret and turned about for guidance.

Sometimes Alexander Horn, sometimes his clergyman, sometimes Dicky Barkell had offered him counsel; but matters of conscience hitherto he had decided for himself. Much he distrusted the signalman's sources of inspiration; yet to Barkell and not a minister of the Christian Gospel, he went at this pass.

He sought his friend on a grey evening in late summer, and together they walked upon the high ground above Okehampton. To the somewhat sexless Barkell he confessed his own fire of the flesh and found it easy. He explained how, by gradual stages extending over many months, he had drawn closer to Primrose Horn and felt that destiny designed to unite them. Then, even in the hour that would have seen his declaration and her acceptance of it, came the message from the dying. Those tender passages of love-making were broken off; and now it was impossible for Wolferstan to renew them without acting a lie. His passion was dead beyond possibility of waking; his real love, smothered by circumstance, but never, as he believed, extinguished, burnt again with fires both fierce and clear. There was only one woman in the world for him, and no world without her. It might indeed be that Ilet was not for him, and that her child and her dead husband's memory and mother must suffice to fill her life; but whether she would in time accept again his love and worship or refuse them, the fact could not alter their existence.

"I'd rather live with the shadowy hope of having that woman, than with the eternal possession of the other—that's how 'tis with me, Richard," he summed up.

"When you do ask a question, it's a poser as a rule," answered Dicky; "but this one don't look so difficult to me as it may to you, perhaps. It's a question of how far you went with t'other. I'll tell you why for you came here, Dodd, and didn't go to parson. Because he'd say 'twas for your conscience to answer, and you think I wouldn't. And I'll tell you another thing: your conscience is clear, for all you think and pretend it's not."

The other started at this direct attack.

"You talk of conscience very glibly," he said.

"Why not? I never told you I didn't trust it. I only explained the cause of it differently to you. 'Tis a live thing, anyhow, and it's told you that you've gone too far with t'other to draw back and still be at peace with yourself. If it had told you different, you'd have believed it first time and been very well content."

"You're wrong there—utterly. 'Tis just because I can't convince myself how far I did go that I come to you."

"If you don't know, I'll wager she does. Have you ever axed yourself what that woman's been thinking all these months?"

"No."

"Well, try to."

"She must see the case is altered now. To marry where you don't love is a hard nut, Richard. My conscience certainly does not support that."

"Didn't you tell her you did love her? Didn't you kiss her? Surely that means everything? How does she know you're hankering after Mrs. Pierce? How should she?"

"My silence must have shown what a complete change Ilet's freedom had made in my mind. She can't have been so very much astonished surely—remembering the past?"

"You're in a tight place—even I see that, knowing so little of 'em as I know or want to know. Throw over that woman now and you've got an enemy hungry as the grave for evermore. Not the love of fifty widows will shield you from the hate of one like her. She's said to be a very determined sort, and she's waited a long time for the right husband. She's got the pluck of ten men. She wants you; she worked terrible hard to get you from your own account; and she wasn't ashamed to let others see her game.

She'd actually brought it off, mind. If I'd walked instead of run from Meldon, when Pierce was smashed up, you'd be engaged to be married to her this very day, wouldn't you?"

"I admit that; but suppose 'twas Providence sent you? Haven't I a right to believe so?"

"Not if you call yourself a thinking man. Does Providence change its mind like a woman? Does Providence plan to put you in a girl's arms and then pull you out of 'em again by a contrivance? If there is a Providence, 'tis not a spiteful fool. Anyway, a time will come when you'll say 'twas the Devil sent me to you, not Providence, if you throw her over. That's all I've got to say about it. I warn you for your life's peace. I say 'marry Miss Horn.' She's a pretty good sort by all accounts, and as pleasant as any of 'em, when she gets her own way. She'll be rich, I suppose. You'll climb high with her to help. You'd never be happy, remember, unless you were going up and up. Anyway, as to rightness or wrongness, you'll not be doing wrong to take her."

"I should, for I don't love her."

"Too late for a little point like that. You loved the female in her, and would again. That'll do for a start."

"I'm not much impressed with your opinion, Dick. I wonder what your father would say now?"

The signalman laughed amiably.

"Come and ask him, if you like. Why not go round and ask everybody till you find one as jumps with your mind? 'Tis strange to me that one so strong in life should be so weak in love—yet I dare say it often haps. You put it to father, as if 'twas somebody you'd heard about, and see what he'll say from his Christian point of view. And I'll bet you a pint that me and him are of a mind for once."

"Is love for another woman to count for nothing?"

"Not now. That's ruled out by the run of the game, since you can't have both."

A silver sunset, scarcely touched with warmth but spun of cold greys, spread upon the clear and colourless west. Beneath it earth faded into leaden darkness and detail vanished from the outspread land. Horizons had already vanished; the great hill that swells east from Okehampton, over whose bosom the fields are spread with divisions between, like the network on a giant tortoise-shell, now lost its reticulation of hedgerows. The rounded valley,

the forests beyond, and the township in the midst, were all merged and overwhelmed with gloom. . Presently the lights of the town glimmered out of the darkness and twinkled deep-set in the shadows of night, like a constellation of earth-born stars.

The men returned to Barkell's home, and Dicky, who was about to go on duty, ate his supper and put the case of Wolferstan to Abner. The old man listened to the details, puffed at his pipe and nodded.

"A kicklish thing for the chap, whoever he be," he confessed.

"And won't he make a rare enemy of the second if he holds off now?"

"That's nought. 'Tis the danger of much worse than that overtaking him. 'Tis right or wrong. He'm as like to have an enemy in the woman soon as late, if he takes her or if he don't. Because, if he don't love her, she'll find it out, an' so she's an enemy of his own household afore they'm married a year anyway. But there's the right and wrong, as I tell you. He's so good as axed her to have him already. And if he don't do it, the man wrongs his conscience; an' to wrong your conscience be to wrong God A'mighty, as gave you your conscience; an' to wrong God A'mighty be to play with hell fire."

"Now you know where that chap stands, Dodd," said the signalman. He winked behind his father's back.

"Gospel truth," continued Abner. "If you must have enemies, let 'em be men—or even women—rather than the Heavenly Father. Death's self be easier than Him; for Death can't do more than kill. Death forgives and forgets the dead. But Him—the Everlasting Jehovah—He made hell, an' that's always the last ugly word for His enemies, if I read my Book right."

"There 'tis then—in a nutshell—Portreeve," said Abner's son. "What could be clearer? A choice between hell in this world for the man, and hell in the next. Let the silly soul choose hell here, for 'twill only last his lifetime—or hers, if he be lucky; whereas if he throws her over now, he's heating the Eternal God's anger against him; and that's only another name for the eternal fire."

Between the mocking and the serious voices Wolferstan sat and listened.

Then, when Dicky rose to cross the bridge and go to his work, Dodd accompanied him.

The subject dropped between them and the Portreeve presently left his friend. Never had he found Richard Barkell less sympathetic and more arid. He tramped home through a black night slowly. But the darkness of earth and sky were light against the gloom of his spirit.

CHAPTER X

BLACK TOR COPSE

WHILE Wolferstan thus fought the battle of his life and as yet but dimly guessed the significance of decision, two women were concerned about him. Months passed and the position developed.

Ilet Pierce, ignorant of the truth with respect to Dodd and Alexander Horn's daughter, supposed that matter was ended and Wolferstan free. Her husband's confession had explained a part only of the facts, but it served to dispel her suspicions as to an attachment between Primrose Horn and her own old lover. There awoke in her, therefore, some gentleness of mind towards Wolferstan. It tintured her grief and lightened her mourning. She perceived that she had greatly wronged him. Farther than that her thoughts would not have taken her, but for the Portreeve's own altered attitude. It became obvious that she still attracted him. His actions were like the beginning of love's actions, and he seemed to have started afresh on the old road. When he met, he did the little things that he was wont to do before they were betrothed. She understood that he began to come closer, but she did not observe that his approach was spasmodic and not regular—a thing of fits and starts. Sometimes for many days he did not see her; sometimes he visited Fishcombe Cottage thrice in a week.

But it was long before Ilet thought of him in connexion with the future. That matter now called for much consideration. The world is too sorrowful to have great sympathy with sorrow, and grief is a luxury for which the poor cannot spare working hours. The bread-winner gone, Mrs. Pierce and her daughter-in-law were immediately reduced to poverty; therefore soon they set forth into daily life again, as the timid bather enters the sea.

Before anything could be done, however, the Portreeve had become a factor in decision. The spirit of her dead husband might haunt night with mournful and reproachful eyes ; but he came to her while she was plunged in certain moods alone ; at other times Ilet suspected that the sacred care of her little child and Abel Pierce's mother might be better assured by marriage than widowhood. Henny, now sane and resigned, held otherwise and cried out against the idea. Ilet had not spoken her thoughts, but the mother of Abel divined them after a protracted evening visit from Wolferstan. She burst into a hail of reproaches, against which there could be no argument. Ilet suffered the elder to rave herself weary ; then she retired to bed with her child.

Thus affairs stood with the widow six months after the death of Pierce ; but for Miss Horn the case was widely different. She started from familiarity with the truth. The truth her rival had never known. Her wonderful gift of patience was strained to its utmost bounds of endurance now. She recognized the altered relations between them and invented excuses for him. They were more the excuses a man might have made than a woman. She probed his thoughts deeply and arrived exceedingly near the truth of them. The battle that he fought was not hidden from her ; his alternations of mind she perceived ; a great fundamental flaw in his character, unguessed till then, revealed itself to her understanding. She found that he could be weak as any other man, and weaker than many. The hopeless but single-hearted attachment of the fool, Orlando Slanning, shone as a steadfast star beside Wolferstan's vacillations. She misread him here and assumed that he was in love with her as well as with Ilet. It cooled her own ardour no little that such a thing could be ; that he still hankered after another man's widow while her virgin freshness and beauty were waiting for him ; but it did not cool her desire to be his wife. She exhausted all her skill when in his company to bring Dodd to the definite word ; but she failed. He was less at Bowden than of yore ; yet he broke off his regular visits so gradually that only Primrose noted the change. Mr. Horn wondered why the man did not propose and have done with it ; while his wife, to whom he confided his surprise, evaded the point. For her part she desired a better match and preferred Slanning to the Portreeve.

The huntress allowed her thoughts to play forward sometimes, even as Ilet had done ; but that way darkness confronted her and anger made her pulses race in secret. The idea that he might yet throw her over seemed actual madness ; it was only this delay that raised even the ghost of such a possibility in her mind. She knew that he was most surely going to ask her to marry him when the interruption came ; and she knew that he was an honourable and upright soul. For such a man to touch her lips with his own and put his arm round her, amounted at the least to the offer of marriage. So she waited for him to come to his senses and finish the thing begun. Her mother only knew the existing strain ; and she guessed it, for Primrose uttered no word concerning the matter and revealed by no look, nor sigh, nor other action, the thing within.

She pursued her life steadily, met Wolferstan cheerfully, was familiar, friendly, eager to hear of his sustained good fortune. She spoke of the subjects he opened ; never followed any topic that brought hesitation of manner to him ; never alluded to Ilet Pierce ; always took cordial leave of him when he departed. She continued her habit of going to church and showed an indifferent demeanour to the world.

Orlando Slanning often met her, and she allowed him to go for walks and rides beside her. They also chanced together sometimes at cub-hunting, for the fall of the year was now returned. He never wavered and still hoped on, fired by love and the secret knowledge that Mrs. Horn was upon his side. Her support might be as shadowy as herself, but it was something. In the matter of Wolferstan, too, his eyes were opened by Primrose's mother. In confidence she revealed the situation as she suspected it ; and Slanning, seeing Dodd Wolferstan and Ilet Pierce together at Okehampton, made much of the incident as he told it to Miss Horn. He even dared to draw conclusions from it ; but she laughed and told him to mind his own business and not be foolish.

"The Portreeve is a sensible man, whatever else he may be," she said. "To saddle himself with a labourer's widow and child—such an ambitious, determined creature ! A most unlikely thing, I should think."

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Even while they thus discussed him, Dodd Wolferstan stood a few miles distant on the Moor, and tramped steadily from the central waste homeward. That day he had finished his photographic commission with the regret proper to completion of a pleasant task. He had just taken certain pictures of the shaggy, ~~desert~~ scenes round Cranmere Pool. Heavy rain had partially filled the ancient cradle of rivers and lent a little of its old-time beauty to that austere desolation. Under conditions of sunshine and blue sky, Dodd worked successfully; then, a little after noon, he ate his bread and cheese, smoked his pipe and rested for a while before setting off on his return journey. At grey dawn he had started, and watched the nightly mists steal away at the advent of the sun.

Now there came to him a period of clean thinking, and, like many before him in that uplifted loneliness, his mind turned upon itself and wrought a grander pattern than usual into the texture of resolve. Stark and stern in the colours of the dying year, Dartmoor spread around about; and stark and stern life faced him. Clarity reigned in his spirit for a season; free for once from the shifting rainbows, storms, mirages of desire and love, he saw the kingdoms of his own heart and their allegiances.

That spectacle plunged him into battle, and as the storm of it blew off, clear duty shone out like the sun. To desert Primrose now must be to cloud his life with dishonour; and to take her was to cloud his life with loss. Content could never dwell under his roof more. Ilet's self could not make him happy now.

His nature suffered deeply and the conflict tore him. He fell to prayer, that he might the better support a determination growing in him. He assured himself that his mind was now most resolutely affirmed, and he urged himself to do quickly the thing that he had decided upon. There were heat and turmoil and even a frenzy of rebellion in his mind at his own conclusion. It did not come as a residuum from the crucible; it did not remain after the purifying fires were out and the strife cold. It rather reached him fiercely in the very heat and storm of battle. It pierced him like a wound, was blown to him like a flame, enveloped him, scorched him, struck him down weak and gasping. The resolve was come at before its foundations were established. His own fearful haste to accomplish it, showed that he mistrusted the strength of the conclusions upon which it was built.

His spirit raged against right for a long time. Then he started to his feet, slung his tools over his back and moved westward with strides swift and uneven.

"To-day—to-night—before God I'll see her and be her promised husband. I owe it to her and my own honour. I kissed her—I loved her—I thought I loved her, anyway. A man has no right to dwell in doubt of such a holy thing as love. I'm rightly punished, and though my punishment may last till my grave, I'll bear it as I have borne all."

Self-pity swamped his mind, and his steps slowed down as he contemplated his misfortune. The consciousness of honour saved did not support him. His soul was full of bitterness. He began to feel that he was most unfairly punished. Cruelty lurked in such an awful reward of his error. This was a wanton stroke of Heaven: to ruin a promising man at the outset of his career. He had done the work of ten and lived laborious days; he had conquered the lusts of the flesh and won the credit and esteem of all honest folk—for this. He was to be crushed for ever for one moment of weakness. He would not have punished a disobedient dog so terribly himself.

The man broke his thoughts, as we snap a string, and blew them from him with a great expiration. He was now on the flank of High Willhayes, far under Fordsland Ledge; and next he sank into the defile between that hill and the precipices west of Oke. He intended to follow the river by Black Tor Copse onward until it flowed beneath South Down. Then he would climb to Bowden and ask Primrose Horn to be his wife.

He thought of Barkell, and his sore heart for a moment envied the other's philosophy. But Barkell had urged the course his own conscience now counselled. Dodd went on his way sick with religion; and yet he felt deeply angered with himself at an emotion so evil. Only the Source of Evil could have sent it. His mind held firm. He looked at his watch and told himself that within two hours, before sunset touched the world, he would have promised to wed a woman he did not love.

Then he stood among the oaks of Black Tor Copse; and moving there, with her child in her arms, the woman he did love came to him very innocently, and stood between him and his purpose. It remained for the foundations of that purpose to reveal their strength.

He looked ahead and saw her among the grey tree-trunks—a tall, dark figure, that moved slowly and held an infant wrapped in a little mouse-coloured shawl.

Black Tor Copse spreads straggling under the granite masses above. It is a stony grove set in a wilderness, flanked by the steep of a mountain on one side, fringed by the silver of Oke upon the other. The song of this river met the lisp of the leaves in ceaseless strophe and antistrophe through summer months. Now the wind woke the foliage and diminished the voice of the water; now the tinkle and whisper of glittering falls dominated any listening ear with their music. Sometimes the trees slept and not a leaf stirred; sometimes their arboreal slumbers would suddenly be broken by a mighty clatter, when blue-winged wood-doves clashed away from hiding-places under the low boughs. Or at twilight a fox might bark and break the primal peace of this most ancient wood. These and countless lesser things knew the place for home; but conscious creatures rarely haunted it.

Ilet, however, came here not seldom while yet her future remained unsettled. To her sad spirit the fastness spoke with a force beyond the power of words and a peace beyond prayer. Nature's impassive heart held communion with her troubled one and comforted it. She had seen the wood bud and shine and darken through spring to summer; she had marked it flame again to the touch of October, had watched the leaf return to the root and the lichen-clad branches bared for another winter.

Wolferstan stood beside her without words, and it seemed that some sense of the meaning of this meeting struck her mind also, for she, too, was silent. He put down his things, and they sat together on a stone, where often she had sat before. A cradle of granite hollowed, full of moss and leaves, was at her side, and she laid the baby in it.

"More pictures?" she asked presently.

"The last. I've done my work to-day. They should make a pretty book if well printed. I've been to Cranmere. Was up and away before five o'clock."

"You must be very tired."


"Of my own company—yes. Of Dartmoor, never."

"It comes to me quite sad-like that I've got to leave it."

"Leave it"? What d'you mean?"

"There's no money, you know. I'm going into service, as soon as the child is weaned."

"Service! But I promised Abel Pierce."

"His mother—yes—not me. I'm young and strong. My little one here is going to stop with mother, and I'm hoping to go out in Okehampton, so as to be within reach of them.  for you, you've done enough as it is."

"You can't! I won't have it, Ilet!"

"'Twill be a very good and proper thing for me."

"I won't have it, I tell you."

She said nothing.

"How long is it since poor Pierce went?" he asked.

"More than six months now. I see you've had his father's stone set up again and his name cut on it too. And the text. 'Twas balm to his mother when she read it. She blessed you for it."

"I'm glad she's forgiven me. I know I've angered her, coming so often to see you of late. But a force stronger than fear of her dislike drew me. I'm a miserable man, Ilet, though all the world thinks me such a smiling, prosperous one."

"I'm very sorry to hear you say that, Dodd."

"The things that don't show—the fool's tricks we do and only we know them—us and God."

"You shouldn't let your sense of right torture you too much. Ban't healthy-minded. Parson said last Sunday that consciences can be too active as well as too lazy. But he made haste to add that 'twasn't a common trouble wi' Okehampton folk."

The Portreeve showed interest.

"'Tis a great point that—especially coming from such a scholar and soul-searcher as him. Barkell holds that conscience—the still small voice—not so small neither, for it shouts like thunder often—he holds 'tis no more than another name for what we've been taught, or what we've gathered together of learning."

"What then?" she asked.

"Why, then it follows that it may tell us wrong. We've all learned more in youth than we'll stick to in manhood. Once show that 'tis education working, and not Almighty God, and things be easy that looked difficult—yes, and other things grow hard that looked easy. It cuts both ways."

She shook her head.

"You'm too learned for me. I can't even follow such words or understand 'em. What was it made my Abel speak at the end—just afore he went? The fear of God surely."

"The fear—yes. Fear of what his Maker and his Judge would do if he took his long lie to the pit. God forbid that I should judge him. Yet——"

He broke off and stared back at his resolves of an hour before. Already their stern outlines were dimmed. He rebelled in his heart, turned round upon himself, clutched at any metaphysical straw that could help to save him from lifelong union with the unloved.

Unconsciously Ilet did the rest. She spoke tenderly and hopefully. She revived him. Her eyes triumphed over him. The steadfast strength and simplicity of her sentiments; her interest in things of religion; her patience before the grey future—all impressed themselves with passionate force upon his spirit.

"My husband made me promise to go to church," she said. "And I do; and slowly—too slowly belike—the going grows to a good thing. 'Tis very restful. I look forward to it. Prayers ban't to me half I've heard you say they are to you; but in time——"

"Pray with me, Ilet!" he burst out, and his voice was wrung with more than she guessed at. "Pray with me—add your dear, lovely life to mine, and our days shall be a prayer and a striving to do good and make the world better. Ilet—Ilet, marry me! I can't go any further without you. If 'tis wrong, 'tis wrong—yet why? Yet if it is—there's no wickedness beyond atonement."

"'Wicked'! 'Tis not that, but great and generous above the ways of common men. I ban't worth your thought, let alone your love. 'Tis not to say one word against that dear, loving heart that be cold in the grave—not a word. But——"

"Marry me. He wouldn't say 'no' to that. The spirits, with their higher, truer knowledge, are never hard-hearted when they look down at us, Ilet. They don't grudge us the poor little childish hopes and plans for happiness that make up the fleeting good of life here. Marry me; be part of me; let us go hand in hand always through the few years. I implore it—I implore it, Ilet."

"You ax for a poor, broken thing. An' this little bud—what be she to you?"

"Dear to me—always dear to me, since she's yours. God

judge me if I don't love her like my own, Ilet. And you—say it—say it quickly. Say you will—some day—in the future after the full year has passed. The full year, or more, as you feel about it. Say it, or I won't answer for myself. You owe it to me. You're a just woman. Say it, Ilet."

"This comes something too soon, dear Dodd. If you will, you must. I'll take you come presently—and I thank God for it, and your grief or good I'll share. Such a feeble thing as my life be—I'll spend it for your happiness—every working, thinking hour of it. 'Tis no treason to him, for you've a right above all rights. I wish I was better worth such an unchanging heart as yours."

"God bless this day, and blot my doubts, and show me I have done right in His sight," said Wolferstan solemnly. "May the Everlasting Father that makes resolves in our hearts, then brushes them away and puts others there instead—may He stand beside us in the life before us, Ilet. May God, as sent you to me in a terrible inner hour, have sent you for His own high purpose. And right well I know He did do."

The Portreeve took her into his arms and held her long without speaking. He did not kiss her. The child slept beside them.

"Never a word of this yet," said the widow presently. "Never a word till he've been gone his full year. 'Tis only seemly. You'll promise that?"

"'Tis very seemly and right. We'll say nothing till after next Easter."

"Thank you, Dodd."

Silence fell between them and the voices of the leaves and the water rose in their eternal hymn.

"What Yes Tor couldn't give, the Copse have granted," he said. "Now we are one for evermore, and nothing but death can come between."

"And that can come so easily—at a breath," she answered.

"We've got fifty years of work for Heaven afore us, please God."

"Hold the child a little. I'd like to see you do it," she said.

He slung his tools about him and she carried his camera, while the atom in the shawl slept peacefully on his broad breast.

"What a light morsel 'tis!"

"Light or heavy—according to the heart she's pressed to."

They took their way by the river; and the wood was left alone

to its own moods and voices. Where they had sat, the grass blades slowly rose again ; the depressed mosses recovered. The clouds rolled over the hills and the stream rolled over her bed. Waters passed melodiously through the gorge to their sister river and their mother sea ; while aloft, now like a ball, now like a panoply, now like snow and now like fire, the subtle, silent flakes and vans of the great clouds sailed. They were bringing the rivers back again from the Atlantic to their cradles in the wilderness.

Thus the unceasing changes are rung on the river and in the cloud and in the last arcana of the human heart ; thus a truth appears from these plutonian rocks and the ceaseless waters that lave them ; from the vapours that the west wind herds and drives homeward to this wild land out of the wilder ocean ; from the human heart of Wolferstan, throbbing with joy and darkened by inner doubt and suffering.

Matter is eternal, but no form of it ; and there is nothing absolute—neither at the foundations of the round world, nor in the domain of conscious intelligence. Morals and matter alike know no constant form, since evolution is an imperishable principle to which both are subject. Of that and the other natural laws, known and unknown, alone can it be said that they endure, that they are universal, that they exist independently and are above the fitful span of any single planet and its burden of life. As man swarms upon the face of this his home, exists and passes endlessly until the end ; so the golden galaxies of innumerable suns and the wonder and glory of the systems that they sustain, sweep their solemn pageants through the universe ; shine and live ; fulfil their destinies ; are darkened, perish, and depart. Only the laws are eternal, not the mightiest worlds that obey or intellects that reveal them.

CHAPTER XI

BREAKING THE NEWS

AFTER the anniversary of Abel Pierce's death was passed, Wolferstan obtained Ilet's leave to make public the news of their betrothal. He had sunk upon a sort of peace and believed that marriage would consummate it and finally put his heart at rest. But now it was necessary that he should inform the world of the thing that he had done; and when he set his face to Bowden on a certain Sunday in spring, he perceived that peace was not yet. To tell Primrose Horn of his engagement appeared a hard thing; therefore he sought it first.

The talk at dinner ran on the Okehampton Agricultural Association. The secretaryship was vacant, and Mr. Horn expressed a hope that Wolferstan would get it. The matter, indeed, was nearly settled in the Portreeve's favour, and he much desired to fill the post for various reasons.

"Good," said Alexander Horn. "You'll be thorough and not scamp the work. 'Tis only by looking to the parts you can make success of the whole."

"I've got to thank Mr. Slanning for it, I believe."

"More likely that woman in front of you," said the farmer, pointing at Primrose. "I lay Orlando asked her advice. Her word's law to him—eh, Prim?"

She shook her head.

"It rested with a friend of his. Dodd was nearly decided upon. And I said I was glad—that's all."

"And what makes you glad be good enough for Slanning," answered her father.

"I didn't know that," murmured Wolferstan. "But I'm grateful indeed. It suits me well."

Mrs. Horn uttered a few words in her gentle speech.

"So busy as you are, you've hardly time for gratitude, Mr. Wolferstan."

"I'm sorry," he said, and his face flushed up. "I stand corrected. You're all so good to me without ceasing, that I've taken too much for granted. I'm not worth your kindness; I——"

"There--there," interrupted Horn. "None of that. She will be so sentimental. She only looks at one side of you. Let be."

"I feel all your goodness and my poor payment. I owe you all so much. I am busy indeed—but not too busy to learn from my betters. Forgive me if I've said or done anything to hurt you, ma'am. I'd rather go dumb to my grave than speak a word to give you pain."

"'Tis not what you say; but what you——" she replied in her whispering voice. Then the farmer stopped her.

"No poetry—won't have it at dinner. Go on with your food, all of you; an' don't peck, missis—for God's sake don't peck! 'Tis my daily cross to see you fiddling with your victuals. I'd give 'em a thousand pounds if the doctors could make you hungry."

He snorted through his nostrils, like the sound of one of his own bulls. Then he proceeded with his meal and did not speak again until the end of it.

Wolferstan now addressed his remarks principally to Mrs. Horn. Her attitude surprised him and hurt him exceedingly; for he understood the thing in her mind. Circumstances and this unfortunate incident combined to make his announcement the more difficult. But he did not flinch. After dinner, when Primrose walked beside him in the garden, he told her.

"Wish me joy," he said. "I've long wanted to break a great secret to you; but she wouldn't let me until now. Ilet—she's going to marry me. Things happened—a cruel, deliberate plot. It was hatched out of the fiery love of that poor dead man. He separated us—poor chap! 'Twas no fault of mine—or hers—and God He knows it. All's clear between us now; and when I could love her again, instantly my heart began to do it. You'll understand—so swift and quick as you are."

"I understand," she said.

He wanted to praise Primrose, but felt that he dared not.

"Thank you," he answered. "I knew you would."

Her eyes contracted and he saw her mouth become thin and the lips grow narrow. The expression thus produced was new to him. She was looking at the summer-house wherein he had kissed her. As she looked, she put up her hand to the spot where his lips had pressed her face. Then she gazed steadfastly at him and he looked away.

"A dreadful lie came between me and that woman," he said. "A cruel lie—answered for now. That's all I've a right to tell."

"Is it all that I have a right to ask?"

He was silent; then a smile came to her face. This confession had been no surpassing surprise to her. She had long felt it; she had long known that he cared nothing for her now, and that he would marry Ilet if he could. She had long expected this utterance and rather wondered at the delay; yet undying hope and her own passion had preserved a secret, sanguine undercurrent running through her mind. Now the last word was spoken and he had proclaimed himself. He had told her that it was to temptation he yielded, not to love; he had made it clear that mere masculine weakness under provocation had brought him to her lips and waist. He never had loved her; and, not loving, yet had kissed her and, without question, had meant to ask her to be his wife. But the accident of Ilet's sudden freedom was enough to shatter all; and now—little more than a year afterwards—he acted as though those moments had never been.

She smiled and held out her hand.

"Great news—startling news for some of us. But you will be late for your Sunday-school class. Good-bye."

He understood that she desired him to be gone. He read all that she meant into her words. For a moment he stood still and meditated rebellion. She divined his thought and her glance turned again to the arbour.

"Good-bye," he said and left her. He tried to hold up his head and step out as usual; but she was standing and watching him, and he felt her eyes and did not attempt to pretend indifference. He was conscious that the thoughts in his heart affected his gait and lent a meanness to it. He was glad to get out of her sight. His self-respect received a painful blow. He told him-

self that it must be many days before it returned to him whole. He poured out his mind on Ilet. Only that way justification appeared. He kept her resolutely at the top of his heart, and assured himself that for her he would have done the same a thousand times. He was defiant with himself. He fell into a rate of progress far above his usual speed and presently overtook some boys on the way to Bridgetstowe. According to his custom, he improved the occasion and tried to impart a high principle or two. But the words sounded grotesque for the moment, and he had fallen into silence before the school-house was reached.

As for Primrose Horn, she stood quite still and watched him out of sight. Then she turned to the house and ascended to her own room. She threw off her hat and jacket, looked at the bed, but did not press it. Instead she began to tramp slowly up and down—as she had tramped when waiting for Wolferstan on the day of the death of 'Brown Boy'.

Deep within progressed the alchemy of a changing passion. The love she had borne him—albeit of a temper never fine—now melted, and the red-hot vessel of her heart held its products of raging hate and scorn. There was nothing to leaven the venom of this transmuted emotion. No act of hers justified his defection or excused it; for he was wholly ignorant of her part in the past. She despised the thing she loathed; and she despised herself for loving him so long, for the shifts and artifices, for the plots and subtle snares. They had made the salt of her life through years. What would life be without them? She could not live without them. They must continue.

Up and down she tramped; then her thoughts concentrated and weighed her down into a motionless position. She sat by the window and stared out at the world.

Her resolution came swiftly and completely armed. Nothing was changed save the point of view. She had pursued this man for love, and she had captured him. Her part had been effectually and successfully performed. Failure resulted from no fault of hers. The prey had been untrue to himself—so she explained it. At the critical point of the chase, he had escaped her by a metamorphosis of character. He had sunk into dishonour and evaded his obligations as a man.

She followed the metaphor in her mind; she rose and tramped

again. The insulted dignity of sex stormed in her. Her beauty, affection, tact, histrionic genius—all were overturned, ignored, trampled upon by the clumsy, callous hoof of a boor. For a boor he was in this ; and in his shame-faced confession and sneaking exit.

She thought of his future wife without envy and without anger. That she could not hate Ilet interested her. She supposed that it was because a heart can only be full of hate. The flood and volume of her wrath was released to drown one man. Not a drop remained for any other soul. Again her passion made her sit very still. Every atom of energy was poured into the dynamic action of thinking. It subtracted from the full throb and thrust of her brain to move hand or foot. Even her eyes, albeit they moved, were turned inward and saw not the thing actually reflected in them.

A revenge great enough for this unutterable wrong was the object of her search, and she did not despair of finding it. It would be necessary to begin all over again. Another struggle like that of the past lay before her. But it promised to be easier. She felt that the destruction of a man might not be so difficult as the winning of him. After two hours alone, a longing came into her mind to speak about Wolferstan, to hear other people discuss him, to spread the news of his forthcoming marriage. She became anxious to learn opinions upon it.

Her wish in this respect was gratified sooner than Primrose expected, for Orlando Slanning called presently and, seeing him approach the house, she smoothed her face and drove her thoughts away from her eyes.

Presently she sat at the tea-table with the young man and Mrs. Horn. But her father was no tea drinker and did not appear.

She was impressed secretly with her own perfect self-control when Dodd Wolferstan's name arose. So people speak at first of the sudden dead. Not until the change is driven home and apprehended for a part and parcel of things as they are, do heart and courage fail, and love claims its due of broken words and sleepless sorrow.

Orlando first mentioned the Portreeve and Mrs. Horn replied to him.

"We differ," she said. "Seldom enough do I differ from my

own ; but in the matter of Mr. Wolferstan, Primrose and I do not think alike. I cannot admire his character as much as she does."

"He gets on like a house on fire," said Slanning.

"He does. He is all things to all men. I fear there must be some winking at honesty sometimes."

"Too many irons in the fire, if you ask me," answered the youth. "He'll come a howler some day. You don't see him so often as you did, Mr. Horn tells me."

"I cannot honestly say that I miss him. There's a lot in breeding, Mr. Orlando. If we in this house don't know that, who should? And what holds of dumb beasts, holds of thinking humans. Not a word against the man's father would I say, and him in his grave ; but the fact remains that he was a hedge-mender, and it's not possible for the cleverest young man among us to go outside the blood in his veins. I speak it in all charity, I'm sure."

"He will be married before long," said Primrose calmly ; and both her hearers started.

"Good gracious, my dear ! The things you say so quietly ! 'Married' ! Who ever to ?"

"Need you ask that ? Abel Pierce's widow. What was she called ? 'Het', I think."

Both the mother and lover were quite overcome, and each was busy with a similar reflection. Mrs. Horn found a wave of sympathy strike her dumb. She believed that she knew a good deal of what lay in the mind behind her child's smiling face. But it seemed not possible to speak of that now. She kept silence and then began to cry. A moment later she rose and abruptly left the room. She wept awhile in private and the tears of sorrow for Primrose presently ran into tears of joy for herself. The girl must swiftly recover from her disappointment, and this crushed hope would be thrown aside and obstruct the path of her future no more. She burnt with indignation when she thought upon the faithless Portreeve, yet was filled with thanksgiving that he had proved faithless.

"Forgive dear mother," said Miss Horn upon her parent's departure ; "any sudden thing like that upsets her. She is as sensitive as an aspen leaf. We have known Mr. Wolferstan

rather well for a good many years now. This was not expected by her."

"Or anybody—surely?"

"I expected it."

"You—of all people!"

"Why not?"

"Well—really—I thought—in fact, everybody thought. Thank the Lord, everybody thought wrong, anyhow." *

She nodded.

"I understand you," she said.

"As for me, I'll never hate him again—never. I'll be the first to congratulate him," declared Orlando.

"Yes?"

"Such a weight off a chap's mind—like waking from a nightmare. Hearing this, I can forgive the world. He certainly said 'poor Slanning', but nothing matters now. I'd forgiven him long ago. No malice in me—at least, not much."

She regarded him intently, but said nothing.

Suddenly a dim flash of the truth streaked his cloudy mind. He half guessed what had happened, but shrank from hazarding a thought so delicate. She spared him the trouble.

"You have always fancied that I was fond of that man, Orlando?"

"Only my infernal jealousy, I dare say; but it's true: I did."

"You were perfectly right. I was fond of him, and he knew it."

"You were his mascotte—his luck. All things smiled on him because of you."

"He knew it; he found out I cared for him and took advantage of it. Once he put his arms round me and kissed me. I waited for him to speak. He never spoke. Now he is going to marry another woman."

"Good God!"

"I wish I could share your generous praise of him. But I'm only flesh and blood. I cannot."

"Praise! I'd like to . . . I will!"

"You mustn't champion me. That would be absurd. The days of champions for women are past. But you are always so good."

"You make me shake and burn," he said. "I'm boiling over. I can't sleep again till I've horse-whipped that man. I wish to God I'd not helped to get him the secretaryship. It's too late to stop it now."

She smiled.

"Think a minute. Why not? Don't imagine I'm a saint, Orlando. We're old friends, and confession is good for the soul. Why regret the secretaryship? He has wronged me utterly; he has insulted me; he has scorned me. We are all fools; but——"

She broke off to see how much he comprehended.

"The man that dared to wrong you is my enemy till I die," he said.

"Don't be theatrical about it. We must—I say 'we,' but really this is no business of yours. I've no right to drag you in."

"Say it again," he entreated. "It's the most blessed word that I ever heard. I'd die for you. If it's theatrical, I can't help it. It's true anyway. Gladly I'd die, but not till I've paid that devil for daring to put his cursed hands on you."

"You're a man, at any rate," she said.

"Let me show it. Let me take him by his red throat, and disgrace him before the world, and shake the life out of him."

"I hate him too much for that," she answered calmly. "Men hunt the fox and hare for love, the weasel for loathing. Do you follow me? This is sport—sport in earnest—with hate for hounds. I hate him as never a woman hated a man before this hour. My hate is my life—waking and sleeping for evermore. Don't be rough with him. Don't spoil the sport. Let him have fair law. I shall be in at the death."

She laughed at the image, and Slanning's eyes grew large.

"I am glad of this success. He must go higher yet—higher and higher—till he's worth tumbling down."

"By Jove—I see! What a wonder you are."

She stood up and he passed out of her sight. She spoke aloud, but not to him; her passion throbbed, like harsh cymbals, through the natural melody of her voice.

"Let his cup be full before I empty it; let his joy wax before I make it wane; let his hopes rise, as high as heaven, before I bury them in dust and ashes. My brain shall plan it; my hands

shall do it. 'Tis worse to have and to lose—as I have—than never to have at all. Let him have all—full measure—and lose all. I'll poison his joy of life and his trust in man. I'll go deeper yet and tear the religion out of him! Even that I'll do—till he's stranded, naked, ruined—a byword for gipsies and road-menders."

"And I'll help you," he said.

His offer sounded ludicrous—like a little child promising to assist an adult in some hard enterprise.

"You want a man to drive this home to the hilt," he continued. "Let me. My knowledge of the world and my intelligence will jolly soon crush him. Let me tackle the scoundrel, Primrose. I implore it."

She came back to herself slowly and made as though she had not heard his offer.

"Go now," she said, "and forget you've heard an angry woman. What play-actors we all are when we get cross!"

"Angry! I'd never forgive you if you weren't angry."

"And don't meddle with a hair of that man's head—not if you want to be my friend."

He promised to do nothing and went off in a tempest of rage; but it rang largely unreal. The true emotion of the moment for him was jubilant hope. He could not hate the man who had opened the door of salvation. Indeed, there was little genius for hatred in Orlando's nature. He remembered Primrose's words as being rather awful; but he doubted not that she would cool down presently. Meantime she had said 'we', and that was the syllable stamped in his heart henceforth. He took it with him and cherished it as a pearl of price.

The woman from whom he parted knew his character better than he did himself. She weighed him in the balance of thought after he had gone.

"What he couldn't do for hate of the man, he would do for love of me," she thought. "But there's time enough to think of that."

Then rage caught her up again in a whirlwind, as she thought of the wasted years and her altered life and wrecked ambitions. Anger did not distort her face, but hardened it to stone. She looked out at nature for a while and her breast heaved and her fingers were laced together. They locked and unlocked awhile.

Then she returned to her own chamber and saw neither man nor woman again that day.

In the morning she was so completely herself and so cheerful of demeanour, that her father, who had heard the truth from his wife, doubted the facts and felt glad to think that Mrs. Horn must be mistaken.

CHAPTER XII

‘JOY GO WITH YOU, AND TWOPENCE’

NOW returned October and the light, growing daily feebler as the sun declined, became at once glorified and weakened by intermingling with the humours of earth. The leaf fell, robins called ; sweetness of fruit hung heavy on the opal air ; the moths, that in high summer awaited twilight, now danced at noon and sucked their last nectar from autumnal flowers.

On such a day there came to the house of Wolferstan a brief procession which seemed small by comparison with the magnitude of the local joy displayed in the Portreeve's honour.

From the church, after he was wedded, he walked with his wife's hand in his ; laughed, nodded, blushed ; tried to scrape the rice out from under his collar ; marvelled at the distance from St. Bridget's to his own home.

Little banners waved across the way ; flags flew from many windows ; garlands were displayed elsewhere ; and the bells rang bravely.

Richard Barkell was best man. He walked behind the bride and bridegroom with Miss Jane Perryman. There followed Abner Barkell, Ned Perryman, a curate, the brothers John and Thomas Ball, three married men and their wives and a few other friends, including Ilet's Aunt Susan from Sourton. But Mrs. Pierce was not of the company. She no longer resented this union and in secret it even gladdened her heart somewhat, because life had narrowed for her to the tiny dimensions of her dead son's infant daughter. With secret cunning she looked forward and foresaw a time when circumstances might place the child's control largely in her hands.

Wolferstan was leaving Bridgetstowe at Christmas, because

Okehampton offered a wider field and greater possibilities of advancement.

“’Tis a wonderful and anxious state seemingly,” said the maiden, Jane, as she walked beside Dicky.

“So it is by all accounts, but it has compensations, according to those that are in it. Though whether that’s true or merely said to excuse their own silliness for walking into it—who knows?”

“Childer’s the chiefest trouble, I should reckon,” she said.

“No doubt at all; but we mustn’t speak of sage and onions to a goose. Wouldn’t be kind. You an’ me in our wisdom will bide a spinster and a bachelor, however.”

He laughed as he spoke and looked back at the curly-headed, calf-eyed young man known as Johnny Ball.

“As to that——” she answered; but could get no further.

They reached the distorted ash that twisted above the Portreeve’s gate. To-day it flamed with scarlet berries brighter than any of the bunting that hung beside it. Soon the wedding feast began and the curate asked a blessing on it. He belonged to the people, and with a fine wisdom, rare in curates, clave to them, made of them his friends and shared their interests and pleasures.

“There’s a startling bit of news come to my ear,” said Wolferstan to Dicky Barkell when the men smoked their pipes in his vegetable garden after the banquet. “Strange it should happen to-day. You know the ins and outs of me so close, Richard, that you’ll understand how strange it is. Young Mr. Slanning of ‘Slanning’s’ is going to marry Miss Horn.”

“Ah! you’re lucky then: you’ll have one enemy instead of two,” said the signalman drily. “For husband and wife are one, if all we hear be true.”

“Enemies! What d’you mean? ’Tis the best news I’ve heard this many days.”

“I’m glad you’re pleased, old chap.”

“Surely the supreme happiness of marriage——”

“‘Happiness’? How can that be when brains marry a fool?” asked Barkell.

It chanced that Ilet, in the garden with Jane Perryman, overheard him.

“Don’t say you be talking of us, Mr. Barkell!”

"No, indeed," he answered. "I was only speaking in general terms. My argument is that there can't be much happiness if a clever woman takes a fool to her husband."

"You speak in ignorance," declared his father; "a clever woman and a dull man's a very good marriage mixture, and I've seen it work very well—with love thrown in to sweeten."

"What! Such a pair as Primrose Horn and young Slanning?"

"Why for not? If he obeys her in everything." •

Wolferstan nodded.

"He'll do that for certain. I know her pretty well, and him too. A woman of great strength and force of character. She wouldn't have been happy with a man as strong as herself. Though it asks for a strong man to be stronger than she."

He turned to Ilet.

"We must think of a wedding present for them," he said.

"Have they given you one?" inquired Ned Perryman.

Wolferstan regretted the question and looked a little uneasy.

"Can't say they have," he answered.

"Perhaps they be thinking, like you, what 'tis to be," said Dicky.

"Anyway she'll have the brains and him the brass—a very strong combination of Providence, no doubt," declared Ned.

"Let's hope they'll use their high gifts in a Christian manner," murmured Johnny Ball. But the younger Barkell was perverse and persisted in his cheerless prophecies.

"High gifts—him!" he scoffed. "If you knowed him, you wouldn't expect any such thing. His highest gift will be obedience; and the woman knows it; and that's why she's taken him. Look at the chap—about as much to his face as there is to the barber's dummy in Powlesland's window at Okehampton! Putty painted!"

"If he's putty, us'll hope she'll mould him into a proper vessel for the Lord's work," said Johnny.

"A good-hearted creature, however," declared Tom Ball. "To my knowledge he gives that old ancient huntsman, Harry French, half-a-crown a week out of his private purse, out of regard for the sport Harry used to show in his fox-hunting days."

"To his credit for certain," admitted Barkell. "But whatever are we all talking about, when we've got a bride and groom of our own amongst us?"

An hour later husband and wife drove off to the railway station. They were going for three days to Exeter.

The little party clustered round, and Mr. Perryman, by virtue of seniority, threw the shoe.

He was red and excited with brown sherry. His thin beard floated about him and his eyes sparkled

“Joy go with you—and twopence!” he cried in a high-pitched voice, while men’s and women’s voices echoed the old wish.

Then Ned flung the shoe and it struck the back of the closed fly with a bang. Thereupon Tommy Ball picked it up and flung it into the window as the carriage moved.

“Where’s her child to?” asked a woman of the party.

“Along with her first’s mother,” answered Jane Perryman.

BOOK III

CHAPTER I

THE CUT DIRECT

VARIOUS causes contributed to decide Dodd Wolferstan upon a change of home. Therefore he had taken a house at Okehampton and designed to occupy it as soon as possible. He also began to think of a little land in that neighbourhood, but his wife and he differed somewhat concerning the uses to which this ground should be put. He much desired to build a cottage or two and find himself an owner and landlord, if only in a small way ; she reminded him of the great prosperity of his little market garden at Bridgetstowe, and urged him to pursue the familiar operations on a larger scale at Okehampton. His reason inclined him to listen to her ; his ambition turned towards bricks and mortar as a greater thing. The matter was in abeyance, as the lease of four acres of land in the vale of the Oke and distant a mile from the town, was doubtful, and the owner set his face against cottages ; while Dodd knew that to build any other sort of dwelling in that secluded valley would be vain.

There came a winter day when Wolferstan pursued his business in Okehampton and met Dicky Barkell on his way to the station. The Portreeve proceeded with him ; but Dicky's news caused him to change his mind, and presently he left his friend and returned to the town.

The matter related to Primrose Horn, for Orlando Slanning's father, who still lingered alive, had announced the wish that his son might at once be married and proceed to his work at the mill.

Mrs. Horn had prevailed with her daughter to consent and the wedding would take place at Bridgetstowe in three weeks.

Wolferstan was much interested by this information ; it served

also to render him uneasy. Only once since his own marriage had he met Alexander Horn on business, but the farmer revealed a marked change of attitude and, their affairs concluded, they had parted without the usual cordiality on the part of the elder man. Since then Wolferstan had only seen the Bowden folk at church. They did not call upon his wife; and they did not ask him to bring her to the farm. He waited and hoped for this invitation, but fruitlessly. Ilet was indifferent and had urged him, if only as a matter of worldly wisdom, to ignore the slight and go himself; but this was impossible, for more reasons than he imparted to his wife.

Now, however, an opportunity offered to act, and though none at Bowden had thought proper to inform him of the coming event, Wolferstan nevertheless saw his way clear. He had, indeed, long determined on his attitude when the wedding of Primrose Horn should be announced. Ilet supported him in his intention. Secretly he still hoped that an invitation to the ceremony might reach them; but his hope was slight.

Leaving Barkell, he returned to the town, visited a silversmith of his acquaintance and, after some deliberation, purchased a handsome silver butter-dish and paid three pounds for it. He then proceeded to the 'White Hart' Inn, ordered a mutton chop and a pint of beer, and sat down to concoct a letter.

The composition proved difficult and his chop was cold and his liquor flat before he completed the work.

Thus he wrote to Primrose Horn:—

"DEAR MISS HORN,

"Will you allow an old friend, and one who can never forget all he owes to your dear father and your mother and yourself, to send you from his wife and himself a trifling memento of the great event soon to happen in your life? With all my heart and soul I wish you joy and happiness and contentment. Mr. Slanning deserves you, for he has a big, patient heart and is an honourable and upright man and a good sportsman.

"May God bless you both and crown your lives with prosperity and continued happiness, is the wish of your most sincere and true friend always,

"DODD WOLFERSTAN."

He made a parcel of the letter and the butter-dish, fitted them into a cardboard box, and presently despatched it. Then, by an

odd coincidence, five minutes after leaving the post office, he ran full upon Primrose Horn and her mother in the Okehampton Arcade. The younger woman turned a shade paler than usual and her bright eyes shone steadfastly into Wolferstan's; but there was not one shadow of recognition in the look. Her mother fluttered and rustled somewhat—like a reed in the wind. Mrs. Horn's breath left her lips with an expiration that conveyed in its sound æcute dislike, and she did not look at the man as she passed. Dodd had taken off his hat and said "What a strange——" But there he stopped, for the women had gone and their backs were already towards him. He heard Miss Horn say "Now the baker's, mother," in a tone absolutely indifferent.

For a moment he stood still, then put on his hat and hastened away, hopeful that nobody had seen the incident.

But his stride lagged as he climbed to the station, and by the time he had returned to Bridgetstowe, Dodd was in a very depressed state of mind. His wife met him at the station in a little dog-cart, and as she drove him home he explained, and expressed regret that she should have had to wait for a second train. He then related the events of the day, hesitated only when he came to the meeting with Mrs. Horn and her daughter, but finally described the occurrence as it took place.

Ilet was much surprised.

"Then 'tis all explained what you thought. They haven't forgiven you for taking me instead of her, Dodd."

"I'm afraid not."

"I wish it had happened afore you sent that rich gift. 'Tis very unreasonable in them."

The man had never told his wife all the truth concerning Primrose, yet, at this moment of dejection, it was strongly in his mind to do so. It had not before seemed necessary, but in the light of these events the necessity grew. Ilet would be puzzled and indignant so long as he reserved the actual facts. He regretted not having told her sooner, but for the moment felt averse from it. That she must now know seemed clear, but he put off the recital.

"Say nothing to anybody," he answered. "'Tis not so surprising to me as to you. We'll speak of it another time. Only mind this: the blame's not all on their side."

"That I won't believe, my dear, though 'tis like you to find

excuses for them. The insult's theirs—along of jealousy that you didn't take her. Like the rest of the world, they reckoned you was going to do it. You kept your own counsel as the way of the strong man is. D'you think I don't know you? The soul of honour and uprightness. Never a shadow of right did you give that woman. If you said so with your own lips, I wouldn't believe you."

Here was the easy opportunity to speak, but still he let it go.

"I'm long ways short of the man you think me, Ilet. A very weak, erring chap."

"Don't be downcast. The loss is theirs, not yours. We all know what you've done one way and another for Farmer Horn. I'll teach you to have a cheerfuller conceit of yourself some day."

"Never," he answered. "Life's beginning to knock that out of me already."

Within four and twenty hours the matter had moved another stage, and the attitude of Alexander Horn's family was defined by the master of Bowden himself. He spoke few words, but they were to the point and made his view sufficiently clear.

It happened that on the line again next day Wolferstan found himself in a third-class smoking-carriage alone with the farmer. Horn was engaged with a newspaper and merely glanced up as his old servant entered. Then, without any sign of recognition, he pursued his reading.

This was more than Wolferstan could endure. He crossed the carriage, sat in front of the other and spoke.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Horn, but there's nought like an understanding, and you're not the man to deny that to the humblest of us. Yesterday your wife and daughter cut me in the public street. To-day you do the same here. How does it stand between us, if I may make bold to ask it? When I was married, you neither wished me well nor sent one line about it. Your ladies never came to see my wife; and though I waited and hoped that I might bring her to Bowden, they never—— Well—there 'tis. Be plain an' let me know what I've done."

The other puffed a little, but from anger, not uneasiness.

"So I will then—if you don't know. I thought your conscience was the best part of you. You passed for a straight chap; but you're not straight, else you wouldn't ax these questions and

try to bluff a man old enough to be your father. Answer this, and swear afore your God you'll answer true. If that labouring man, Pierce, hadn't died, would you or would you not be married to my girl to-day? Think afore you speak. You're on oath, mind."

The other only hesitated a moment.

"Yes, I should, sir," he said.

Horri looked at him; his great jaw grew red and his breath came fiercely.

"Then how do you dare to sit there and ope your mouth to me—ner father? You don't deserve the good word of any honest man. Church-going! Teaching in Sunday-school! Never you raise your eyes to mine again, or hope one good word from me, for you won't get it."

Wolferstan bowed his head and made no answer. At the next station he left the carriage and entered another.

When he went home in the evening, he found his butter-dish and letter returned to him unopened from Bowden.

That night he spoke to his wife, when they had gone to bed, and told her all.

"You thought yesterday I was ill-used, sweetheart. You were wrong. I've only got my deserts. 'Tis bitter to have the cold truth driven home, like Alexander Horn drove it to-day; but 'twould be bitterer yet to go on living with a doubt between me an' you. I don't know what you'll say or do; but afore I sleep I'll tell you everything."

"Yes, Dodd."

"The day poor Abel died I was at Bowden. I and Miss Horn were in the summer-house together, out of the storm, and that's where Dicky Barkell found me."

"Yes."

"Het, I'd given up all hope of you then. God knows, when you took Pierce I never harboured an evil thought. You'd gone, past recall, and I only loved you as we love the dead. For a long time it had been borne in on me how proper it would be for me to take Primrose Horn. She'd made it clear enough that she liked me, and her parents expected it. I'd gone on slowly with her till I felt I'd make her a good husband, if no more. I let myself be weak with her. I wanted her body and I reckoned her soul was only asleep and would wake up come presently. When

Richard ran that day, I was going to ask her to marry me. 'Twas done—all but the words. You were dead, mind—dead for me. I was as good as engaged to her when the message from your dying husband reached me. Ilet, I had kissed her. Then the whole world changed and I suffered a good deal in doubt of my duty. Anything less than you I should have conquered. Even you I had conquered. The battle was fought and lost—or won, according to the point of view. Then God sent you to me in Black Tor Copse, and I saw what He meant—at least—yes—what He meant. But if I hadn't met you at that moment, I should have gone to Bowden and finished what I'd begun so long before. Thank Heaven, you came. But don't misunderstand the Horns. They've every right to despise me. There's nothing to be said. I thought I had done right. I don't know now. Speak, Ilet."

"Right or wrong, it is done ; and right or wrong, you did it for love of me, Dodd."

"That's no excuse if 'twas wrong."

"To you it mayn't be ; to me it is all the excuse I want. What be all the world compared to you ? Your good's mine. If you was wrong, you're only human and can't be faultless to the whole world, though you are to me. Live it down."

"They'll never forgive me."

"How do you know that ?"

"She won't."

"You've got me on your side, however ; and your own character."

They often fell asleep hand in hand. He took her hand now and gave a long sigh.

"I'm a weak worm for all my prosperity and power of getting on. Why didn't I tell you this before ? I owed it to you in honour. Yet I kept it bottled up like a coward, till 'twas forced from me."

She did not answer. She was thinking of the immense love he must have had for her, to wrong another woman thus on her account. It was a love larger than his sense of honour.

Her own love flamed up for him.

"God forbid as I should say one word against you. I'm proud of you and I worship the earth you walk on, for the greatness of your love to me. I wronged you worse than ever you wronged

her; I played with you crueller than ever you played with her. Let her go to the man who be going to marry her. She'll forgive presently when life works with her. An' if she don't, who cares? 'Tis you an' me against the world, an' we're strong enough."

"I say to myself that I ought to be punished. What shall I do to punish myself? I thought that you'd be my punishment to-night. I braced myself to hear you speak hard things, Ilet; but you don't."

"Who be I to judge you? I *am* you. If you're sad about it, so am I. If you're shamed, so am I. We're one."

"I deserve harsh words and you make love to me."

"Live it down as you lived down worse things. Be yourself."

"'Tis bad advice, for I'm a poor thing. I'll try and be better than myself, Ilet. I'll go to God with this an' let Him put in my heart what I should do."

"He'll forgive you. If you've got the God you set such store by—and me—what else be going to hurt you?"

"I must get right with my conscience, Ilet."

"D'you mean you did wrong then?"

"Not that. I'll never say I did wrong to marry you—an angel from heaven that you are—but I did wrong to think of marrying her. Yes, without a doubt I wronged her."

"Well, you wronged her in a way that can't be put right now, so you'd best to go on with your life and be patient."

"To be patient will be the punishment."

"Don't forget me neither. I can do much, maybe, in this. We shall meet some day. She's only a woman, after all's said. She might be a mother afore the year's out. Then we shall find the chance to do her good. The least get a chance to do the greatest good sooner or late. 'Tis only the quickness to see, and the want to do the good be generally lacking."

"We shall have the quickness and the want," he said.

Neither had taken the converse position into thought; neither had reflected that the powerful can also strike the weak, given the quickness to see and the want to do harm. Wolferstan cast about how to atone for his wrong-doing and how to punish himself for it. That the punishment might lie in other hands, in hands much more eager to inflict punishment than he would prove to endure the same, had not occurred to him. He could not see the right penance; he could not conceive of any possible

penance in the light of Ilet's love and courage. But there was another who knew him as well as Ilet in many particulars, and better in some. Her knowledge might have swiftly enlightened the Portreeve as to where he would be found most vulnerable.

Now this man, largely comforted, pressed his wife's hand and sank into the deep silence before sleep. He heard her eyelashes on the pillow and knew that she still opened and shut her eyes. From time to time he felt her responsive pressure on his palm. Then he fell into slumber, his heart not unhappy, for the confession to Ilet had immensely lightened his mind and her prompt response had made him thankful beyond words and very prayerful. He was praying, lazily and hopefully, when he became unconscious.

Presently she slipped her hand from his and turned round. Sleep was as yet far from her. She traversed his confession, but it only warmed her heart to him. Her nature was above all things generous, and the power of gratitude belonged to it. She hungered now to take this grief off his shoulders. Many plans revolved in her mind, but immediate action was impossible. Her child moved in its bed beside her, gave a little yawn and then was still. She turned again to her husband, kissed his ear gently and snuggled close beside him. She was glad that an opportunity had come to do something to help his happiness. Slowly sleep mastered her, but no prayerfulness touched her mind. She began to think of little, deft, practical beginnings towards the task of reinstating her husband at Bowden. The wedding procession would drive past Wolferstan's house on its way to and from church, and Ilet wondered if they might venture to put up one or two little flags and a garland at their gate, as a sign of kindly thoughts.

So thinking, she fell asleep. Her plans were all based on ignorance of the truth. She had never in her life been scorned and knew not what such an experience breeds in the heart of the proud. Imagination can but faintly picture the depth and height of that torment. It must be felt.

CHAPTER II

A LARGER LIFE

WITH mingled emotions Wolferstan resigned his office of Portreeve and left Bridgetstowe, that he might enter upon the larger life that Okehampton offered.

His house was high up on the hill that climbs to Dartmoor from the little market town below. Behind it ran the road to the artillery camp; before it spread the expanses of North Devon crowned with cloud. Glorious skies sank to that low horizon, and all the magic of dawns and sunsets might from this lofty region be observed by those who had leisure or love to watch the pictures of the air; but for Wolferstan most of his time was spent among men, or upon the acres that he had acquired by Oke river, in the valley near the ancient ruins of Okehampton Castle.

To build was out of the question here, and as only a lease of years could be secured, Dodd set to work at his former occupation of market gardening and perceived that it might presently be possible within this sheltered nook to produce certain crops ahead of his less fortunate neighbours.

On Sundays Ilet and he sat after dinner in their little verandah, and looked down upon the town nesting far beneath them. Then Dodd smoked his pipe and built trustfully upon the shifting foundations of future time.

He had made a little garden for Ilet, but few things prospered at this wind-blown altitude, and the yards of heath and fern that he had cleared about the dwelling were presently given over to her poultry. They scraped about to the very threshold—a circumstance which at first annoyed Wolferstan; but finding that the fowls of richer men than he did the same, he ceased to trouble about so trivial a circumstance.

"This, after all, is only a temporary home," he said. "Come presently, when my foot's well in here and I've taken my stand among the townspeople, we'll go down the hill into a decent house. I've got my eye on Widow Westcott's already. In the course of nature, she might be dropping off just when I'm ready to buy."

"Why, 'tis a mansion, Dodd! Ten rooms in it, if one."

He puffed and smiled.

"And why for not? But no hurry. The pigs are coming up to-morrow, and they can run on the hill and cost not a penny. Then the shippin will do very well for my horses—I must begin to think of getting 'Rover' in fettle again for the Show. He's taken first prize two year running now, and will the third time if I know anything."

"I wish you'd suffer me to let our front rooms in summer. People be always dropping in to ax if we can do it, and 'tis throwing away good money to refuse. There was some military gentlemen from the camp, come with the last battery, who called only yesterday."

"Once for all, no; and don't name it again," he said sharply. "I won't do nothing peddling of that sort. We're past that now, and it wouldn't fit in at all with my plans and projects. People judge by that sort of thing, and if I can stand for office down-along presently, 'twould be brought up against me very quick. There's no dignity to it, Ilet. Did I buy the piano at Forde's sale for strangers to play on? No. 'Twas that your little one should learn come presently."

"As for dignity," she answered, "there ban't much dignity to empty rooms that might be fetching a pound a week—all profit. But since you're set against it, I'll say no more, my dear."

"There's other things," he continued. "I don't want to live for nought but selfish gain. There's the tithe, Ilet. I can't for the minute put out a tithe of my money to God's service; but I mean to make it up with a tithe of time. I've got ideas for doing good here in my small way. I'm going to start a men's club—social. For meeting of an evening and reading the papers, and playing a game of bagatelle, and smoking our pipes. 'Tis a great enemy of the public house and draws young chaps—especially if you can get gentlemen to drop in of an evening and give 'em a lecture now and then and enlarge their minds."

"'Tis a good thought and will make people respect you."

"I hope so. Then the boys. You know how set I am on catching 'em young and training them aright."

"You'll take up a Sunday-school class then?"

"Yes, for certain. And I've got other ideas that only want working out."

"I'll help heart an' hand where I can, Dodd."

"Well I know it! There's no quicker way to make people feel kind than to try and do your bit of good among 'em. If they see you going up alone, they bide cold, and them above don't offer to pull, nor them behind to push; but let folk find you'm big-hearted and want to better the place so well as yourself, then they'll take an interest and be friends worth having."

"You come with all men's good word among 'em."

He shook his head and relapsed into momentary depression.

"Not all."

"I thought 'twas agreed that we'd say nought of that."

"I can't forget, however."

"Time be on our side. In the long run 'tis easier for most people to forgive than not. Come up so far as Black Down with me an' little Henny. I'm taking her to see her gran'mother this afternoon."

"So I will then, for I want to call on Dick Barkell. He's agreeable to the idea of a workmen's club, so long as I never ask him to go near it. If he does, he'll be putting his free-thought poison into their minds; so I've told him the further he keeps away the better I'll be pleased."

They walked along together through the camp and over the heath-clad breast of Black Down. Dodd carried the baby until they reached Redavon brook on its journey to Meldon; then Ilet went forward to Fishcombe and her husband, keeping to the right, presently reached the Barkells' home.

Wolferstan found Dicky enjoying Sunday leisure. He was sitting in his shirt-sleeves by the fire, smoking, and reading 'The Service of Man'.

"Hullo!" he said. "What's the best news with you? How's the club going on?"

"Slowly but steadily. I've come about it. Draper Knapp will let us have the top floor over his shop for thirty pound a year, so that's all right; but would you ask Sir Thomas Carew to be

President, as a compliment to him and an advertisement to the scheme, or would you just go about among the chaps and do it without gentlefolk at all?"

"There's to be no politics nor religion—eh?"

"No politics—just social; as to religion—I want chaps to be better for coming, certainly."

Dicky smiled at the fire.

"You're a rum un," he said. "Confess now: you want to preach to the poor beggars sometimes of an evening."

"Not I—not more than the usual preaching of man to man. We all preach, Dicky: our lives are sermons and hold up some cause—good or ill—that we stand for."

"They would be if we was all above board, no doubt; but there are lives that preach one thing to the eye, but be only false scents, to turn all noses away from the truth of the man, and what he's doing and running after out of sight. I don't say 'tis so with you. I don't say that this social club is to advance your own credit and renown. But if 'tis a success, it will do so, unless you let others who may be greedy of credit take it."

"I don't seek no credit myself."

"Well, let it work its own way. Don't get putting your oar in and drawing morals and settling what people are to drink. If 'tis a good thing, 'twill make for good. Let it stand on its own bottom and don't turn away jolly members by playing parson. My advice is that all be equal without any patrons or rot of that sort. The big-wigs be quite stuck up enough already. How will Sir Tommy Carew's name help? The sheep that would flock to that bell-wether ban't worth counting."

"You're bringing in politics now yourself," said Wolferstan.

"Not me. 'Tis you that will if you make that chap your President. He hates the name of freedom in any shape or form. He'd protect everything—but the poor. You'll start handicapped if you stick his name to the show."

They talked at considerable length, but Wolferstan and his friend looked at life from standpoints so opposite, that their discussion little advanced the project. Dicky was too satirical, and presently, when he again returned to the personal view and bluntly showed Dodd that perhaps, after all, his own ultimate welfare actuated this enterprise, the rising man got angry.

"I wish to God you hadn't got such a mean heart," he said.

"You'm frost to my fire when to do good's the matter. Can't you ever credit me with high motives?"

"You're a man easily blinded," answered the other. "You came for me to criticize, so 'tis idle to be niffed with me because I'm doing it. I don't say you set out knowing you was going to better yourself; but I do say that you never put hand to a thing that don't tend in that direction. You shout with the loudest and you always be found on the side of your inclination. Call nome a fortnight agone. I met you and asked you to go and see old Perryman, because he was ill and would take it very kind in you. You said, 'Why don't you go, Dick?' And I said, 'Because my way of thought ban't his, and I can't bleat about the golden streets and an eternity of happiness—not believing in any of that pantomime.' You shrugged your shoulders and said, 'I'll go if I remember it.' Then I said, 'Don't fear that, Dodd. Us always remember the unpleasant things. A well-trained conscience looks to that. You won't forget it.' Did you forget it?"

Wolferstan's face fell.

"No," he said. "To be honest with you, I did not forget it."

"Did you go?"

"No, I didn't."

"There you are in a nutshell," said Dicky mildly. "Forgive me, Dodd—ban't no business of mine; but you challenged it in a manner of speaking. As for me, I'm always open to hearing the truth about myself. There's nought so interesting—and nought so nasty most times."

"You blame me for wanting to preach; but 'tis what you're always doing in your bitter way. However, I'm not one to flinch at the truth or to quarrel with it. How's Ned Perryman now?"

"My father was along with him last Tuesday and found him better—sitting up. Didn't you, my old dear?"

The younger Barkell shouted the last question, but it did not waken his parent, who slept in a high chair by the fire. So Dicky flung 'The Service of Man' at Abner and prodded him in his stomach.

Whereupon the ancient arose with a start and then groaned, for his action had provoked a stab of rheumatism.

"What's doing?—What's doing? You, Mr. Wolferstan—Portreeve no more—lifted to higher things without a doubt."

"The question is—Perryman," interrupted Dicky. "I tell Dodd the old chap was sitting by the fire on Tuesday when you called."

"So he was, and us had a tell about the hereafter, an' I vexed un cruel as usual—being all against flesh and blood there, while he cleaves to his carcass and swears as he'd not know hisself without it. But, whether or no, he was to bide indoors till Doctor's round again this week."

Wolferstan rose.

"What d'you call it from here to his place?"

"A matter of four mile over the Moor an' six by the road."

"Then I'm off," said the visitor; "an' when Ilet comes for me, which she be going to do on the way back from Mrs. Pierce's, tell her as I shan't be home afore supper, because I'm reminded of a visit I ought to have paid long ago."

He departed, and Dicky rose and picked up his book.

"Off to cheer up Ned, be he?" asked Abner.

"Yes; an' now he'll get the credit of a proper deed; whereas, if there was any honesty wi' the recorders, it did ought to go to me," answered his son.

A thin murmur fell on their ears, and Abner, long trained to it, rose and stretched for his hat. He was as skilled in the music of the viaduct as a physician in the discords and harmonies of the human heart. He knew the sounds of the storm and of the various light or heavy, slow or swift trains that played upon that mighty harp of steel.

"There's the mid-day from Lunnon," he said, and crept out to see it pass.

CHAPTER III

THE BLUE ROSETTE

THE great day of the Okehampton Agricultural Show had come again, and fair skies shone upon it. Beyond the town northward, in the glades of a park, the exhibition was held; and now crowds from outlying villages and the railway station climbed up leafy lanes to the entrance. Under the shadow of the trees, poor, armless, legless human ruins crawled or sat, like maimed flies, while the people dropped occasional pennies into their hands. A stump of a man, supported on a little trolley with four wheels, played a concertina. Masses of many-coloured holiday attires crowded at the entrance. The bright blue, pink and white dresses of the girls; the black coats and hats of the gaffers; the hot violets and reds of the matrons, their flaming bonnets and feathers; the strong, serious, gaitered red and brown men in their market clothes—all swept along together, converged at the gate, then scattered over the grounds within.

The hackneys had covered stands, as befitted their dignity; the cart-horses were drawn up under a hedge, and their mighty flanks presented a glistening series of rotundities in grey and black, chestnut and brown. Their manes and tails were tied and plaited with bright braid. Beside one indifferent giant, who wore the blue badge of victory on his enormous chest, stood the owner—a little, round-faced, sandy-whiskered man, whose countenance shone with pride.

The ring was set in the midst, and the show, with its tents and grand stand, stalls and booths, spread snugly round about. Flags waved; a militia band blared at intervals; the throb and grunting of a thrasher persisted, and steam puffed upward from it. Agricultural implements, painted crudely in dazzling scarlet,

yellow and blue, with strange arms and claws of wood and steel, glared barbaric in the sunshine and killed the first faint warmth of autumn that already mellowed the dark green of the forests. The church was not far distant, and a ring of bells added their music to the hour.

Along the stalls the clearly defined odours of horses, oxen and sheep passed into each other. Over the kine a fragrance hung, and the gentle-eyed, straight-backed cows gazed mildly upon their admirers. Here too were little red calves, bright in the coat as a new-fallen chestnut, and noble bulls whose mighty breathing and majestic mien suggested knowledge of their paternal fame. One little bull, five months old, stood beside his father—a huge veteran with a front like Jove, a chest like a battering-ram, hoofs that began to turn upward like Turkish slippers, and a ring in his nose. The infant bull was a perfect miniature of his enormous sire, and already, albeit a baby, displayed the lordly air of invincible courage and command, the grand neck, curly forehead, and stern, sulky eyes of an entire animal. There was a suggestion of weight, power and imperious will about him that lacked from the humble, cow-shaped steers ranged next in their class.

A strange human figure sat beside the great bull. He was in command of it, and the monster represented his life. One eye of this old man drooped, his mouth was always opened, and his mind was feeble save where the bull was concerned. The labourer lived for it, and had no other duty save to attend upon this short-tempered but valuable brute. The bull and its business formed the whole matter of his existence, and he alone had power to control it.

The mares with foal at foot attracted very general admiration, and some said that Orlando Slanning ought to have won, with a lovely mother and daughter; but the judges thought otherwise, and Orlando, who bustled about with the insignia of stewardship, was hot and annoyed at his reverse.

His wife and mother-in-law went together through the tents; but Mr. Horn showed not much interest in agriculture and confined his attention to the cattle.

The shadow of the awnings fell pleasantly and their subdued light was grateful after the outer glare. But the heat and crowd within made visitors hasten round and feel not sorry to escape

again. Mighty vegetables awaited enthusiasm. Here were leeks like church candles, lettuces as great as cabbages, cabbages with wonderful purple hearts, as big as bushes. The magnitude of the spring onions was only forgotten before the immense proportions of the winter sorts. The turnips were larger still, and their delicate green faded deliciously into the pure white of their bodies. The carrots and parsnips were spires of red gold and pale gold; among the French beans the prize went to quality rather than size. Some monsters above a foot long were unrewarded; for the winners proved of medium size, with shapely pod and delicate texture.

Mrs. Slanning was interested in potatoes. Here they lay, bursting their silvery skins with fatness, and in all shades of colour, from palest brown to purple. Light played on their silky coats and their skins were delicate and transparent as the white hand of a girl.

Then came fruit and made a fragrance and a great splash of wonderful colour. Red apples, mellow pears, plums yellow and blue, grapes black and white, green figs, tomatoes, melons, peaches, nectarines and autumn leaves furnished a dazzling, glowing harmony in all the season's rich wealth of scarlet and gold, russet and purple, orange and lemon.

Wolferstan took his wife and Henny Pierce round the tents. As Secretary of the Show he was exceedingly busy; and presently he meant to drive his horse 'Rover' in the driving class; therefore his leisure was limited. But he enjoyed this part of the day's work best, and, as an expert, spent some time with the bee products, though he had ceased to show honey himself.

But first came the cream-bowls, each under its thin, corn-coloured crust, and the butter followed. Then the honey appeared in jars and sections. The jars showed the three recognized honey-colours of amber, tortoiseshell, and the medium tint between. A pale honey won first prize, and in the section class Mrs. Horn was victorious. From her hives at Bowden came plump and lovely comb, well filled to the edge, with just a rich glint of golden light showing through the translucent wax.

The band played merry measures; the people buzzed round the show ring, as class after class came forth for judgment; the beer tent was never empty. Victors took vanquished there: big holes were made in the modest money prizes; various utterances

of praise or censure, according to the point of view, were directed against the judges and their awards.

Large interest centred in the driving competition, and most of those who knew him, hoped that Wolferstan would win the Okehampton Union Silver Challenge Cup outright. 'Rover' had two victories to his credit, and only required one more to secure the trophy permanently.

After luncheon the trials in this class began, and Ilet stood and watched her husband harness his horse. Dodd felt hopeful, but a circumstance tended much to mystify him, and he called his wife's attention to the official catalogue.

After preliminary announcements and mention that the cup offered for the driving class was at present in possession of Mr. D. Wolferstan, there came the list of competitors.

"I know something about all of them," said Dodd—"all but the last."

Ilet read: "Mrs. Orlando Slanning. Chestnut Mare, 'Flying Fox', six years."

"Something new?" she asked.

"Quite—so far as I know."

He inquired of another competitor, who was just harnessing his horse, and the man answered that he also had never heard of 'Flying Fox'.

"If she comes from 'Slanning's', 'twill be all right, no doubt," he added; "but she must be something out of the common to beat your 'Rover'."

"She'll drive herself, I reckon," said Dodd.

"Female like: 'tis to show herself more than the hoss, I dare say," said the other.

Presently Wolferstan spoke to his wife again.

"I wish she hadn't entered, all the same—not for this competition. I'm pretty safe with 'Rover', and it's a pity."

"Could you drop out?"

"Drop out"! Not likely now. The cup is mine if I win to-day. And the horse better than ever he was." He patted his steed—a useful, iron-grey gelding of fourteen hands. 'Rover' had some good blood in him and enjoyed an honourable local reputation. He looked exceedingly well and his coat shone.

"Mr. Toms reckons to beat you with his 'Elastic Mary'," said Ilet. "She've come on a lot since last year."

"Not he! She's all right, and she has come on; but she can't live with 'Rover'. Now 'tis time."

Ilet held the horse's head; then Dodd jumped into a neat trap, took the reins and joined the row of dog-carts entering the ring.

In the arena all eyes rounded to reverence before the spectacle of two little dapper, clean-shaved and bright-eyed men. One was clad in grey; the other in light brown. Both wore gaiters, white stocks and hard, flat brimmed hats of approved horsey pattern that matched their clothes; both were the incarnation of smartness, keenness and equine knowledge. Their fame extended beyond the west, and one came from Cornwall, the other from Devon. They were the judges of the hunters and hacks. Their eyes penetrated the horses. They saw more than any other two pairs of eyes on the ground. They seldom differed for a moment. From walk to trot, from trot to gallop, the classes went; and they followed every movement. Then they themselves would solemnly mount; and the stirrups usually had to be taken up for them, because they were very short. To see them on horseback was most instructive; they appeared more at home there than on foot. Having themselves trotted and galloped, they would dismount, feel down fore-legs, touch heaving flanks, and sometimes order saddles off that they might the better judge. They were always cheerful and smiling. They worked exceedingly hard, and not a sportsman present would have doubted the justice of their verdicts. But men are not always sportsmen under the strain of disappointment. An irate owner of a big bay who got second prize but felt himself sure of first in the open competition for hunters, flung down his red rosette and rode off, uttering loud protest. Some laughed, some hissed his temper. The judges were not perturbed. Already their eyes were fixed on the next class as it filed into the ring. They were both breeders; both lived on their knowledge and understanding of the horse. Nor did they lack humour. Sometimes, always smiling, they asked a competitor who showed much daylight to 'get a little nearer his hoss': sometimes they exchanged professional asides which convulsed with merriment those privileged to hear them. Nerve and good temper especially belonged to them; they exercised their knowledge to the full, took infinite pains to be just, and so upheld their reputation as men of high repute in hack and hunter circles.

Now came jingling of buckles, dull jolting of wheels over the turf, and thud of hoofs. Eight traps revolved round the judges; eight drivers performed to the best of their powers. The competitors were already on the move when Mrs. Slanning appeared, and Dodd, at the other side of the ring, heard a shout of applause. Primrose drove a much more stylish vehicle than any other now in the ring. It was light and lofty, and of perfect make. The impassive driver in tailor-made tweeds, the bright chestnut horse and the trap with wheels that glittered like gossamers as they turned, made a fair picture and awoke enthusiastic criticism. Orlando listened to various congratulations and the judges were alert, for this was to be no walk over for the familiar 'Rover'. Indeed, that good iron-grey did not shine by contrast with the new competitor. From the rest he held his own handsomely and must have beaten them, as Dodd believed; but 'Flying Fox' was a great mare and did honour to famous parents. With the new cart behind her and the lovely woman driving, she made a very beautiful picture, stepped like a machine, so that her feet scarcely seemed to touch the ground, and proved herself faster, fairer to see, grander of action than anything in the ring. She was a better mover and more symmetrical than the gelding.

Wolferstan looked up as 'Flying Fox' passed 'Rover', and a glance told him the truth. He was going at his best pace and his horse doing all that it could do; but the mare slipped past like a sunbeam and he knew that she had won. He stopped at the grand stand and drew up in line with the other competitors. It was an admission of defeat; but for once in a way no possibility of doubt existed. The crowd had already anticipated the verdict.

The gallant little judges bowed, took off their hats to Primrose, and congratulated her on her steed. They knew all about 'Flying Fox' and her parents. Then they spoke amiably to Wolferstan, and expressed a sportsmanlike regret that he had not brought off the cup. Amid cheers Orlando, in the capacity of steward, carried his wife the blue rosette, while another official handed a red favour to Wolferstan. Once, with heightened colour and a brief smile, the winner drove round the ring; then she vanished. 'Rover' also, according to etiquette, trotted round as winner of second place; but there were no eyes for him, and

Wolferstan was glad, for his face could not hide the disappointment of his heart.

Soon Dodd had returned to the secretary's tent ; and there the owner of another horse condoled with him.

"Yet I can't say I'm sorry altogether," he added, "for, to tell you the truth, the Union will be glad the cup's not won outright."

The trophy in question stood on a pedestal at hand ; and now Slanning entered with his wife and some friends to see it. Primrose kept her back to the secretary's table and none paid any attention to Wolferstan, but gathered round the prize. It was of silver and stood eighteen inches high. The art of the thing belonged to a mean and garish order. A wreath surrounded the bas-relief of a trotting pony. A list of winners' names was inscribed upon it, and Wolferstan's had twice been cut there.

"How hideous it is," said Mrs. Slanning. "What shall I do with it? 'Tis too ugly for anything."

"Oh, you can hide it in some corner," suggested a friend.

Then Primrose whispered a word to her husband, who turned to Wolferstan.

"Will you let it be known that 'Flying Fox' is for sale, please, Mr. Secretary?" he said.

"For sale? Yes ; it shall be put down in the report."

"For sale!" cried Mrs. Horn. "You don't mean you're going to get rid of the best horse in the show, Primrose!"

"I don't like her, mother," she said coldly. "She's good enough, but—I'm tired of her."

"You've only had her three months!"

"She's for sale, however." Then Primrose turned to her husband.

"You'll bring that atrocity home with you?" she said.

"The cup—yes."

A moment more and she had left the tent with her friends.

That night, after dark, Ilet and Dodd, from their home on the hill, looked down into Okehampton and heard the fun of the fair wafted up to them across darkness. The folk shouted and sang, the lights glittered and twinkled, steam 'roundabouts' whirled and their music brayed.

"I'm glad of it," said Ilet. "I'm right glad she won and you was second. What's the beautiful cup to us? Nought compared with her friendship. This may be the first step."

"The first step—yes," he said; "but how to friendship? This was done on purpose to knock me out of the cup. It was planned against me with forethought."

"Don't think that," she begged. "'Twas all in the honest way of horse against horse in open competition."

"Then why for did she sell 'Flying Fox' the next minute? One of the judges bought it on the spot the moment he heard 'twas for sale."

"She's rich now, and you know what whims us all have. Try to think 'twas plain dealing, Dodd, till you know different; or better still, go your way and don't think about it at all."

"That's the best advice," he said.

CHAPTER IV

THE MEETING

THE land that Wolferstan had rented in the valley promised well, and already, without unreasonable hopefulness, he looked forward and counted his gains. The passage of six months and the return of another summer brought fine crops to reward him, and his peas, as he foretold, were the first in the local markets.

The ground extended on the north side of the river beneath the ruins of Okehampton Castle and beyond. It sloped southerly and was snugly hemmed in to the north and east. Westerly of his limits, lay a long and level tract of heath and furze where targets for rifle practice stood. The place was a good distance from his home, but neither Dodd nor Ilet made much of the hill between and after a long day on the earth below, he was always glad to climb aloft to the more open and invigorating site of his house.

Of the Slannings Wolferstan saw no more after the Agricultural Show. At Christmas Orlando's father died, and his mother left the mill and took a house at Tavistock. Then Primrose and her husband went into residence; and predictions were not verified, for the new master of 'Slanning's' settled very steadily to work and carried on his business after the tradition of sensible ancestors.

Orlando and his wife both rode to hounds and were usually seen at any local festivity; but none spoke ill of them. They were popular and generous.

When his workmen's club was inaugurated, Wolferstan had ventured on a letter to the young miller. He set out the advantages of the institution and begged for a subscription. But his letter received no answer and he knew that the Slannings were still his enemies.

The fact galled him, and friendly responses to his appeal from

other quarters did not serve to lessen his irritation. Ilet herself could not do so. He mourned the position and troubled how to retrieve it. That Slanning now stood high in public esteem was also to his innermost heart a wrong. He did not resent it; but he could not understand it.

Abner Barkell and his son came to Sunday dinner at Wolferstan's, and the theme formed matter for comment.

"Full of mystery the world is," said Dodd. "Who would have thought now that man—so wild and silly as he was—shou'd have risen to the occasion when his father died, and suddenly developed such sense—eh?"

"It's his wife—not him," said Ilet, and Mr. Barkell the elder nodded.

"Not a doubt of it. 'Tis often the saving act of a fool to take a sensible woman. Her head is responsible for everything. A chap don't suddenly begin to do the wise thing after he's been used for five an' twenty years to do the foolish, without a sudden tight hand on the reins. Why, to see him in church o' Sundays at Bridgetstowe—always a black coat now, they tell me. And takes the dish round just as seemly as ever you did, Dodd."

"His wife, of course."

"Still fond of soldiering, however," said Ilet. "I seed his name wi' Captain afore it not long since."

"But no childer yet. That's his thorn, you may bet your life," said Abner.

"Maybe she's not cut out for a mother," declared Dicky. "They don't all like 'em."

Abner laughed.

"Then she'll resist 'em without a doubt. Her will's law at 'Slanning's', an' she won't let child-bearing interfere with horsemanship—such a great one for sport as her."

"'Tis to do her husband a wrong, however," argued Dodd.

"As to that," answered Dicky, who loved such problems, "you open a big question. Women's a right to be heard in that matter. Us oughtn't to force mothership on 'em, if they'm against it."

"Stuff!" answered Abner. "No woman's a right to deny fathership to her husband. Chaps like you would take everything out of the hands o' God an' leave Him nought to do but watch you running the whole earth. An' a proper hell of a mess

you'd leave for the next generation—if there was any next generation at all after your muddling. Childer be the Lord's affair, an' you've no right at all to interfere with it. 'Tis our job to sow the seed, and His Almighty business to order the crops."

"Hark to him!" said Dicky.

"He's right," answered Dodd. "'Tis every man's work to be fruitful an' multiply, Dick—'hough you shirk your duty so terrible."

"What's the sense of plunging into a job you know you'm not fitted for?" asked Richard. "What's the use of turning a good bachelor into a bad father?"

"You'd banish all fight and battle and difficulty out of life, if you could. 'Tis little better than cowardice in you to live the life you do."

"That's what I've told him these ten years," said Dicky's father. "Life would be a paltry business if every man sheltered himself behind the single state."

"To put it on a higher plane," said Dodd, "how are you going to get ripe for usefulness in the next world, if you hide away in this one an' never let the fire of trial and trouble ripen you?"

The signalman looked at him curiously, but did not answer. He was reflecting on Wolferstan's own life.

"Discipline," continued Dodd—"surely the discipline of the world is vital. The discipline of pain, and of grief, and of failure—that's the worst discipline of all."

"There's one worse," said Dicky, "the discipline of hearing a well-meaning man preaching."

He laughed, but nobody else did. Then he grew serious.

"If you want to talk about lofty things, I'm your man; but us never start from the same standpoint and us never agree. You say the world's run right and nought happens that ban't planned and provided for. I say the world's a welter of chance and luck, and it won't work smoother and fairer till mankind grow wiser."

"You'd rule out all difficulty and risk, and make this world heaven. Don't we want training to make men of us? Don't we want the threat of the Eternal Anger to keep us right? Ban't we children all, an' why should the Heavenly Father spare the rod more than the earthly father should? Trial and temptation are

part of the Heavenly wisdom. We call for a deal of bracing here, Dick, afore we are strong enough for the work of the next world ; be sure of that," declared Dodd.

"I say nought against that," answered the other. "Brace us an' harden us by all means. But look at it. Does a father teach his child to swim in a sea full of sharks? Does a mother let her little one take his first walking lessons on a level crossing? Failure be good enough training, as you said just now ; 'tis the highest form of discipline, I grant, and makes for manliness and patience and charity. But look at the penalty your great God puts on failure. Must we risk hell to get to heaven? Be the price of failure in the earthly race to be eternal damnation? 'Tis foolery to talk so. Couldn't He hit on no happier device to make us ripe for glory than perdition? Do you think 'twas a God's idea to set hell, like a man-trap, at the gate of heaven? Every man's born sinless—you'll grant that, I suppose. Then why don't your loving God keep him so?"

"No man is tempted of God," answered Dodd.

"Then why do He let the Devil tempt us? It comes back to His deliberate work, if He's all-powerful. But if there's to be hell, you've got to drop your Almighty, for almighty He's not while one soul's lost—mind that."

"Hell ban't what it was," answered Wolferstan. "There's a good deal of attention been paid to that subject by learned men lately, and new translations of the Scriptures have thrown a lot of light on the matter. There's not the old reason for mankind to fear, I believe."

Abner fired up at this.

"You mind what you're about, Dodd," he said. "Them as play with hell fire in this world may be the first to feel the bite of it in the next. Mind you don't wake up after death to a very painful astonishment. 'Tis about the worst use for an idle man as ever I heard tell of : to get playing with the Book, and a sure sign that Satan's busy as ever he was. Any fool can see his game. Once he gets the world to think there's no such country as hell, an' the place will be full. Let every man stick to hell as don't want to go there : that's my advice."

The old man had become very excited. He spat into the fire and lighted his pipe again.

"From my point of view," said Dicky, "'tis good news to hear

they are knocking the stuffing out of the place. All the same, us freethinkers would rather like to know how much of the Bible's going to be left when they learned men have done with it. I suppose the parsons will keep enough to earn their living by. But if they let much more of it slip through their fingers, the world will wake up some fine day and ask the black-coats what they be there for, and tell 'em it's got a better use for the millions of money they draw."

"I don't like to hear you talk so lightly," rejoined Wolferstan. "Religion is food and drink to Ilet and me; and well you know it."

"Then I'm sorry I spoke," answered the railway-man. "An' I hope your particular brand will last out your time, Dodd."

"You'll come to know better yourself yet, Richard," replied Wolferstan, "if you only look at it with an open mind."

"Perhaps I shall."

"All the same, an open mind's a silly mind, so far as I can see," said Ilet. "What's the use of shifting to every wind that blows? As parson says in nearly every sermon he preaches, where will you get anything better or more comforting, or more like to help you in the hard trials of life?"

"Let Dicky face some of the hard trials," declared Dodd, "then he'll come to see he wants help in them, like the rest of us. His foggy ideas won't be any use then."

Mr. Barkell the elder heaved a great sigh.

"If I thought thicky boy would ever be led up to marriage and Christianity, I'd give five pounds," he said, "an' gladly go without all that money means."

"Thank you, father," answered Dicky. "You're a good old simple soul, an' a credit to all you believe, I will say. And you can mind this, when you'm gloomy about me an' my reckless ways: that so long as your God's all-powerful, I'm as safe as the best of us. Granted the great Workman up aloft, then surely we be all useful tools to His hand and all fit for some piece of work. If He's there, He uses all of us to our proper tasks. Every tool don't want a sharp edge, remember."

They went into Okehampton presently, drank tea with the mother of John and Thomas Ball, then walked through the valley and visited Dodd's vegetable ground.

Old Barkell waded about among the green stuff cheerfully, and praised everything, but reserved his highest enthusiasm for the

ingredients of salads. In his head he puzzled how to put a hint tactfully and solved the problem with success.

"My, what cos lettuces! Never seed the like. 'Tis a master-piece of gardening. An' the spring onions also. They'll gladden many a rheumatic heart, Dodd, and add life to the blood of them as crunches their teeth on 'em."

"Never heard that lettuce was good for rheumatics," said Wolferstan. But already his hand went to his waistcoat pocket for a penknife.

"My dear soul, 'tis better than any doctor's trade. Green stuff, straight from the earth, do calm my pangs something wonderful. Won't grow up-along in our garden; but Dicky will tell you I'm a regular rabbit at it when I get the chance—ban't I, my son?"

"Why don't you ask outright an' have done with it?" said Richard.

"What a chap! Where's your manners to?" answered Abner. "I wouldn't demean myself, I'm sure. Such stuff ban't for us; but I dare say if Dodd have got a little scrubby old root or two as the slugs have spoiled, he'll be so kind . . . No—no—not them prize specimens! Ban't fair to your family, Dodd. They'm worth twopence apiece, if not more."

"You're very welcome," said the grower. "An' glad I'll be to think they do you good."

Abner wagged his head.

"A proper neighbour!" he said. "My mouth's watering to be on to 'em a'ready. Makes me leery to look at 'em."

He took out his handkerchief and tied up three large lettuces. Then he handed them to Dicky.

They walked beside the river presently, for Dodd and his wife were going to see Mrs. Pierce and bring Ilet's child back. As often as they would let her, the old woman took charge of little Henny from Saturday till Monday, so that Dodd might carry Ilet for some outing at the week end.

As they went, there passed them suddenly the Slannings. The road by the stream was narrow and all moved shoulder to shoulder for a moment. Then Orlando and his wife walked forward toward Okehampton. He whistled when fifty yards away, and a big spaniel broke from a brake by the water, shook his coat, and paddled after his master

Abner deliberately stood still and eyed the Slannings with unaffected interest. The rest of the party fell upon a few moments of silence after they had got out of earshot.

"Come on, father, can't e? What are you staring at?" said Dicky sharply.

The old man beamed.

"At a damn fine woman, Dick. To think of that—just after we'd been telling about 'em! My, those pretty women—what an air goeth with 'em! 'Tis just nature in 'em calling all the world to look an' admire."

"She wears wonderfully, to be sure," said Ilet. "For my part I never seed such a beautiful creature afore—even in a picture."

"The 'aughty chin of her!" murmured old Barkell. "Did you mark how she flirteth her hind clothes like a wag-tail? She'm a lovely piece, an' hath lovely garments, without a doubt."

"Shame upon you, father," said Dicky.

"Don't care who hears me say so," answered the veteran. "We old sparks know a thing or two; an' for my part I hope a fine female will always cheer my heart when my eyes fall upon her! Why for not? As for childer, 'twill be a wrong to the race if she withholds 'em—a comely an' a roomy woman as ever gladdened the heart of man."

His weak eyes twinkled. But a great silence fell on the rest of the company, and when Ilet began to talk to Richard of indifferent matters, Dodd still remained buried in his own thoughts. His wife stole a glance at him from time to time, yet did not speak to him, for she saw that darkness was upon his spirit.

The Slannings had passed him as if he were dust. He felt insensibly the difference of their orders. As a bachelor he was Primrose Horn's equal and behaved as such. As a married man it seemed that he was not. What had happened to cause this difference? He felt it, but could not define it. This man ground corn for his living; and he, for his living, grew roots. Wherein did one calling stand socially higher than the other? Examined critically, he brought the difference down to financial details; but he knew that they were paltry details and unworthy of a man's thought. Yet he dwelt upon them. Their very smallness comforted him.

The gulf of enmity fixed between him and Primrose Slanning did not trouble him at this season. He hoped that some day something might happen to bridge it, and enable the families at least to meet with outward amity; but on this Sunday walk the subtle sense of social inferiority struck him as a greater thing. He caught himself regretting his company. He wished that he had not given Mr. Barkell the lettuces, for their aspect, bulging out of the old man's white Sunday handkerchief in Dicky's hand, was homely.

Returning in the evening with Ilet and her child to his house, he spoke, and she knew at once that the remark was his comment on the meeting in the valley.

"You must get a new gown for Sunday wear, Ilet. I don't note these things and don't care a button for 'em; but I want you to look like—like the best of 'em, when we're out walking together. I shall take up a paper for you—one of them women's papers full of pictures. We mustn't be above our equals in this matter. A pretty woman owes it to her state to have gay clothes."

His wife smiled under cover of the darkness.

"So I will then," she said. "Fine feathers make fine birds; but I can never be as lovely as her, Dodd, and you mustn't hope for it."

He uttered an exclamation of annoyance.

"What has she got to do with the matter? She's older than you, and there never was a spark of soul in her face that I could see. You are more beautiful by far. If you had worn her clothes——"

"No—no, Dodd, that's nonsense, and 'tis silly of you to think such things. They keep three indoor servants at Slanning's. One of 'em I know, and——"

"Then you oughtn't to," he said. "And I'll thank you *not* to know her, Ilet. We must draw the line somewhere. You want to help me, not hinder me, surely?"

"You know which I do."

"Yes, indeed. You're my everything, Ilet."

"Be frank always then," she said. "Don't let any cloud come between us, because that would kill me. If I don't please you, Dodd, tell me, and I'll alter it—anything."

"Please me! I thank God for you every time I go on my knees," he answered.

"I ban't worth that ; but such a faulty thing as I am, I've no thought other than you, Dodd, and no wish different to your wishes."

"'Tis my highest blessing to know it," he answered. "Nought can hurt us very deep so long as we'm one heart and soul."

CHAPTER V

PATRIOTISM

ANOTHER year passed and memory of bygone time began to dull for Dodd Wolferstan. He throve and was becoming a personality at Okehampton. But Bridgetstowe men claimed him and were proud of him and his doings. In after days he looked back to the dawn of the third year of his married life as among the brightest periods that he had known. Then it was that success begot indifference to everything but religion. Faith was now at its height with him, and he took no step without consulting, achieved no success without thanking, Providence.

On a high summer day certain annual rifle competitions were being held at the ranges adjoining his land, and Dodd, weary of the eternal rattle of the guns and ringing noise of the bullets on the targets not a quarter of a mile from him, made haste to finish his work. There had been protests in local journals as to the narrow and restricted limits of the range, and Wolferstan was not the only man who hoped that the targets would soon be moved and a new site found for them upon the Moor. Squads of volunteers and militiamen were always tramping past his ground, and, though he said no word, he suspected the latter of some annoying thefts. He had a row of young apple trees just coming to bearing, and their first crop of fine fruit disappeared mysteriously in a night. He was therefore hopeful that the military might be banished from the valley, and had even written a letter to the Okehampton journal indicating a very suitable tract of the Moor for rifle practice.

It happened that firing ceased soon after Dodd left his market garden and then one or two mounted men in uniform and a lady, also on horseback, approached from the ranges. By the foremost

horseman walked a man. He was a shrewd, grey-eyed soul with some touch of prosperity about him; and now he addressed the rider.

"I just watched Mr. Wolferstan go first; because, of course, there's no call to trouble him or anybody for nothing. But business is business. Now, if you please to cast your eye across to them trees, in a line with the old ruins up over, you'll see where my ground ends against the hill."

"Under the high bank there?"

"Five hundred yards from where us be standing, or may be four-seventy. 'Tis a narrow strip, as you see, hemmed by the river, but flat as the back of your hand if his trees and bean-poles an' stuff was taken off."

Orlando Slanning turned back and spoke to one who rode beside his wife.

"Look here, Colonel; here we are. The straight bit to the trees—simply an extension of the old range, if we move it to the right. Then you get all you want and more."

The soldier eyed the ground critically.

"It is so," he said. "But would it be safe?"

"Absolutely. The high ground swells up immediately behind and makes a natural barrier. No bullet could go fifty yards beyond the targets unless a man fired into the air."

"'Tis a sort of hanging wood, your honour," explained Dodd Wolferstan's landlord.

Then Primrose spoke.

"The alternative is Dartmoor, and that has so many disadvantages. Here the men can get upon the ranges in twenty minutes from the station."

The others agreed.

"I must tell you there's no question of renting, Captain Slanning," said Mr. Thatcher, the owner. "I covenanted according with Mr. Wolferstan. 'Tis clear between us that he has first refusal to rent and the right to hold on to the ground for four years more without increasing rent. But selling's another matter. There's nothing against me selling the ground. Of course 'tis valuable land. You see the tilth he's got it in, and you know the wonders he does wi' spring vegetables and such-like."

"Government will go to the Duchy and rent a bit of the Moor cheap," prophesied Slanning's commanding officer.

"But Government would be very glad if some public-spirited man secured this ground for the range?" asked Primrose.

"Delighted, of course. The War Office would thank him. There have been some noble things done by private individuals since the cry for rifle ranges."

"Then look to me," said Orlando. "Yes, my wife and I are one in this matter, and if experts agree this is just what is wanted, I—or rather we—will give it to the nation."

"How is the law?" asked Primrose.

"Well, I got Lawyer Newcombe to run over my deed last night," answered Thatcher. "He drewed it, and 'tis crystal clear, like all his writings. It stands thus: Mr. Wolferstan's got the right to the land for four year more; and, if I sell it, he must have first refusal of purchase."

Orlando's face fell.

"But hang it, this is a national matter. He can't stand up and insist on growing his rotten cabbages on ground that is wanted for the Service?"

"Was any price ever mentioned for this land?" asked Primrose.

Mr. Thatcher hesitated. The soldiers, realizing that delicate questions now asked for delicate answers, edged their horses away and went out of earshot.

"As to price—business is business," said Mr. Thatcher. "I doubt Dodd Wolferstan could buy it; but if 'twas a question of buying or going, he'd make an effort to borrow the money somehow."

"What is it worth?"

"What 'twill fetch, ma'am."

"Ah!—I see. You are not going to be patriotic, Mr. Thatcher."

"I don't say that! I don't say that!"

"Suppose now, being a leading man at Okehampton and a keen old volunteer yourself, that you met my husband and shared the glory of handing this ground over to the National Rifle Association. Wouldn't that be to your eternal credit?"

Mr. Thatcher looked very sly.

"Trust Farmer Horn's darter to be a woman of business," he said.

"Of course I am. Suppose now that you say the ground is worth two thousand pounds, and we offer you fifteen hundred

pounds, and you put five hundred pounds to it out of your own pocket? Then you are a patriot for evermore."

"But if Wolferstan is to buy, then you would expect the whole of the money from him, for there's nothing patriotic in cabbages," added Orlando.

"You can't well refuse," continued Primrose quietly. "Even if we offer the same as he does, you can't refuse, Mr. Thatcher. For that matter, when he hears the excellent purpose to which the land is to be put, perhaps Mr. Wolferstan will make no difficulty."

"Don't you think that, ma'am! Why, he's sunk a little fortune here. 'Tis his backbone like. He's getting out a catalogue come autumn, and going to advertise his seeds and roots. He've got a new cross onion called 'Okehampton Castle' that he's going to put on the market in a year's time. 'Twill be the very mischief for him to clear out. You've got him against you—be sure of that."

"How unfortunate, poor man," said Primrose. "But, you see, straight shooting is more important than even a new onion. And Okehampton has such a name for patriotism. The past history of it is full of great deeds."

"I'll visit him," said Mr. Thatcher. "I'll have a tell about it this night. I shall give him first refusal, according to the documents; but as to whether I'll have a hand in it—I'll say nothing."

"Don't know that I want you to—really," answered Slanning. "For some things I'd rather do it single-handed. However, that can be looked into later. Let us hear what the gardener says as soon as possible."

Husband and wife rode off together, and Mr. Thatcher returned homeward. He had not the least intention of being patriotic. To him local or even national praise was tinkling brass and worthless. He merely desired to see whether Wolferstan or Slanning would pay most for his land; and upon that question he felt little uncertainty.

Slanning was now out with his corps, and overflowed with martial enthusiasm, as he did once a year when the period of training recurred. He rode part of the way home with his wife, and they discussed the pending enterprise from a private point of view. Such a purchase showed two aspects, and the idea had originated with Primrose and not her husband.

"It's a jolly big thing," he said, "but all the same, if you really like it—for your own reasons—so do I for mine. It would open people's eyes. Why, Parliament has thanked public-spirited people for much less. 'Munificent gift', 'patriotism', 'Imperial interests', and all that."

She nodded.

"It's a frightful score off him too, Prim; and the beauty of it is that he can't say a word. All the same, he'll see through it."

She laughed.

"It would be waste of money and thought if he didn't. He's getting such a big man now, that it's worth beginning."

"By God!—talk about a spider being patient! But suppose after all he doesn't see the point? That would be an awful sell."

"He'll see the point, and feel it; and the beauty of the arrangement is that nobody else can. The more he grumbles, the less people will sympathize with him. Only one other person is likely to be annoyed. That is my father. But we can't help it."

"He's such a Little Englander. In figures I suppose it means about two thousand?"

"Yes—or more, if necessary. Wolferstan can only borrow up to a point that would still leave him able to work the land at profit. He's got nothing to borrow on, I imagine, except his produce."

"Well, we shall see how he shapes."

"It will be rather a sharp surprise, for he'll think all is over by this time. I know so well what is in his mind when he gives the past a thought."

"What a brain you've got!"

"He thinks that the little reverse at Okehampton Show, when I took the cup, was my revenge! He says to himself 'How like a woman to plot that and carry it through! Now she's comforted by the thought that she scored off me and took the cup I had as good as won.' He thinks that was the end instead of the beginning. He's had three years' grace. Now we can lay on the hounds."

"It's a terrific revenge. You'll take his ground and have done with him—eh?"

"You're as bad as he is! What a short memory you've got,

Orlando. Done with him! Have we done with the fox when he breaks cover? I'm just picking up the reins!"

"Poor devil!" said Orlando. He knew a good deal more about Primrose now than when he married her; but he loved her no less. She had immensely strengthened and fortified his own position. Happily for himself, he was of the sort that is good material for a stronger hand. He never ceased to be himself—impulsive, silly, vain, large-hearted; but her skill evoked some new melody from the instrument. She brought out the best, concealed the worst, and found him a man in every way well suited to her. Their tastes were much akin, and she could always keep him in a good temper. To preserve the fire of enmity burning in him against any human thing was more difficult; but this also she accomplished, and Slanning, to please her, when she had gone out of her way to please him, would still blaze out into spurious wrath about Dodd Wolferstan. Yet the prosperous world and his own easy fortune did much to make him gentle and large-hearted, so that sometimes Primrose felt that even her strength would not be equal to overcoming his inertia in all directions. Morally his code was lax, but to do anything unsportsmanlike instantly shocked him, and a proposal in that direction had certainly wakened the most stubborn resistance of which he was capable. This she knew, and was far too wise to inflict any unnecessary strain. But the time to strike grew ripe and the weapon was in her hand. Utmost deftness marked her choice. Twice, quite alone, she had visited Wolferstan's nurseries and satisfied herself of their relation to the rifle-ranges. The event recorded was the result. As to price, she knew the exact financial position of her husband, and was aware that he might easily accomplish the sale without hurt to himself. The sum involved represented half of her own marriage jointure.

Primrose left Orlando at the edge of the camp on Bridgestowe Common. He rode to his tent and she proceeded to 'Slanning's,' where the mill lay some miles distant, on the little river Lew.

And that night Mr. Thatcher climbed up the tremendous hill behind Okehampton, and mopped his head and breathed awhile before entering the gate and knocking at the door of Dodd's house. It answered his summons and bade him welcome.

"Hullo!" said Wolferstan. "'Tis Thatcher—eh? What does he come for, I wonder? Get the bottle of whisky, Ilet. I lay he'll want a drink."

"A thirsty climb," confessed Mr. Thatcher. "But us'll leave the drink for a minute. I'm come on business, Wolferstan."

"Ban't quarter day yet."

"No, an' that's not the matter. No man ever paid his rent more regular than you. And a low rent too."

"That's as may be, master. 'Twas a fair rent for the land three year ago; but who have made the land what it is? To charge me for improving your property might be a trick worthy of Duchy, but not worthy of you. Come, now, what's amiss? Out with it."

"Nothing—nothing at all—not from my point of view; but there's movements in the air. No place stands still—least of all this place. Never such a lot of changes as there be always going on here. First, how does it stand between us? 'Tis like this. If I'm wrong say so. Come Michaelmas, you've the right to hold my land up to four more year at the same rent."

"Yes; an' of course I'm going to do it. When the seven year have run, if God wills, I shall be in a case to buy your land. That you'll be glad to hear, I know."

"I always expected it; but how about things if somebody else wants my land sooner? Suppose I've had an offer for it this day?"

"That's a startler. All the same, I get first refusal."

"For that reason I'm here. We've been very good friends, and long may we bide so. But business is business. To be plain, there's parties want that land, Wolferstan, and I warn you they'm very much set upon it. The law says I can sell, and that the owner won't be bound by my agreement with you. But, to protect you, it very properly gives you first refusal. I'm very sorry if it ain't convenient to you to buy, but I can't lose ready money for friendship. More would you."

Wolferstan was much perturbed. He called in Ilet from the kitchen and told her of the position. She also showed concern.

"Anything's better than that, after all you've done," she said. "We must strain every penny for certain. What be you going to ax for the land, Mr. Thatcher?"

"Now we'm in the centre of the bush," answered their visitor. "And I will have a spot out of the bottle, if 'tis the same to you."

Wolferstan helped him, watched him drink, and waited for him to speak. But his answer was indefinite.

"'Tis a case in which there's not much for me to say. Where land's the matter 'tis not so much what a man axes as what he's offered nowadays."

"Valued at my rental, you ought to get fifteen hundred."

Mr. Thatcher laughed and snook his head.

"And Okehampton growing by leaps and bounds? No, no! That's a lot too low, Wolferstan. Even I—a man too open-handed for sense always—even I wouldn't like to part under two thousand and upward. But, as I say, 'tis the hunger of the parties settles the price. A bit of ground will often go a long way above open market value, by reason of a man's whim or a woman's fancy. I don't say it will be so with me—no such luck. But them in question want the ground, and they be rich and very much in earnest."

"For house-building?" asked Ilet.

"No, not that."

"For gardening then?"

"Not that neither. Don't ax me anything about it. I can't divulge nought in fairness an' justice. But there 'tis. I told 'em you had first call on it and that I'd see you. So you've got to make a price. Then, if they go better, 'tis theirs: if they won't go higher, 'tis yours."

"I'd like to know the law about that," declared Wolferstan. "Why, perhaps they'll only wait till they hear my price and then offer fifty more, and so beat me. Surely that wouldn't be fair?"

"Why not? 'Tis merely sale by auction. If you go over them after their bid, then they'll have to bid again. I want to be all fair an' above board as my nature is. If the land's going to turn into a good thing for me—well—every dog has his day."

Silence fell between them and lasted for some moments. Mr. Thatcher finished his whisky and brought out his pipe.

"Might I trouble you for a lucifer match, ma'am?" he said to Ilet.

She brought him a box and he thanked her and hoped the little girl was doing well.

"I seed her down-along wi' you last week," he said. "A proper little fairy, wi' eyes like di'monds."

Ilet smiled and her heart was warm at the praise. Wolferstan worked at some figures.

"If you can bide ten minutes, I'll just go into it," he said. "I hate to have anything like this hanging over me. 'Tis a very serious business indeed from my point of view, and quite unexpected. I should have to borrow, and that's a thing I hate. I must mortgage the land to get it at all. But have it I must. 'Twould mean a very great loss to go out in six months now."

"I only hope you can go above them," said Mr. Thatcher guardedly. The sentiment was a safe one from every point of view.

"Who be the parties?" asked Ilet.

"I'm afraid I must name no names yet; not at this stage of affairs. They'm set on the land; and this I'll say: they've got a very public-spirited idea in their heads, and Okehampton will be on their side—also the nation."

Dodd's pen scratched along. His face was contracted and great anxiety sat upon it.

At last he sat up and spoke.

"I'll give you seventeen fifty for the land," he said.

"No more—not even on compulsion?"

"Not a penny more. 'Twould be to cripple myself too much. I've got ideas as to the future, and they go beyond market gardening, as you know. My thought was when the seven years was out to buy and build. But, even allowing for improvement in land value, which is very uncertain, the place won't be worth much more four years hence. Anyway that's all I can do about it."

"Suppose they say eighteen hundred?"

"Then they can have it at that."

Mr. Thatcher was disappointed. He had hoped that Wolferstan would offer two thousand, and that Slanning would therefore have to pay still more.

"You must take into account the ways and means of borrowing," he said. "I might help you there. I might even lend a bit myself on easy terms. You might, for instance, raise

two thousand cheaper from me than seventeen fifty from another party."

"I don't know nothing about that, and I won't go into it, and I won't borrow from you whether or no. That's my figure, and if I've got to go, the sooner I know it the better."

Mr. Thatcher perceived that his tenant was annoyed. He rose and expressed a very real regret.

"Then I'm much afraid 'tis all up. Two thousand was the figure named by me to begin talking about, and since you won't go better, I must see if they will. I've got my say in the matter too. I can't going to give the land away."

He departed, and Ilet and Dodd talked together into the small hours of another day. Every theory of this purchase that ingenuity could devise, they put forward; and among others they hit the right one; but those responsible for it they did not guess at.

CHAPTER VI

GOOD AND BAD

NEXT Sunday Dodd and Ilet went to church that they might pray very earnestly about the cloud that had risen in their lives. Wolferstan lacked humour, and this want often argues erroneous perspective of outlook both upon mundane and spiritual matters. Now the man adopted his Master's words, and not perceiving the ludicrous disparity of ideas, prayed that this cup might pass from him. In the same breath he declared to God that he was willing to drink it if necessary.

Within ten minutes of leaving church, he found that he would have to do so. Mr. Thatcher met him under the avenues of All Saints on the hill, and, having made an apology for touching business upon the Lord's Day, informed Wolferstan that 'the parties' had offered two thousand, and that he did not feel justified in refusing.

The younger man was in a resigned mood for the moment, and the motion of prayer remained with him.

"If it's got to be—it must be," he said. "There's motive behind it."

He spoke of his God's motive, but Ilet misunderstood.

"Of course. And I suppose Mr. Thatcher can tell us now what the motive is, and what's to be done with that beautiful garden of yours?"

The owner reflected.

"I should think I might—in confidence. Don't name it, mind. The announcement must come from him, and he's the sort as likes his trumpet to be heard. 'Tis to be bought for the nation!"

"The nation! What do the nation want with that scrap of ground?" asked Wolferstan.

"For shooting. The warriors have cast their eyes upon it, and 'tis discovered that if my land be thrown into the rifle range, 'twill make it so good as any this side Exeter. Then everything will be vitty and us shan't have no call to move the butts up-along."

"The very thing we thought it might be!" exclaimed Ilet.

"Sir Thomas Carew, I suppose?"

"Not at all. That keen soidier, Captain Slanning of Slanning's. 'Okchampton have found the winner of the Queen's Cup afore to-day; and it shall again,' he says to me. So he be going to purchase my ground, and no doubt his name will ring in the land come presently, when 'tis known. But mind you don't say no word about it yet. 'Twould dim the glory if it leaked out."

Ilet stole a glance at Wolferstan. She understood the thought in his mind, and how much more the statement must mean than the speaker could guess.

"Well, land's land," she said, "and there's plenty to be got."

"Plenty—plenty. And time to turn round also. You can clear by inches. You'll lose on winter planting, I'm afraid, unless you can get some new ground quick."

"Lose! Lose enough—lose all the tons and tons of farmyard stuff I've put into your ground. The crops be nought. 'Tis what's under 'em have cost the money. I wasn't one to eat the eyes out of the place, then give it back to you more naked than at first. I wasn't . . . but 'tis gone, so all's said."

"You must take it in a large spirit. You must look all round it, Mr. Wolferstan, if I may so say."

Dodd laughed without merriment.

"Yes, I look all round it," he answered.

Mr. Thatcher was glad to leave them, and presently husband and wife passed through the valley by their nursery garden on the way homeward. The same thought brooded in both their minds, and when Wolferstan spoke, his wife understood the allusion.

"To think she smelled that out! What a power of waiting! Or was it the idea woke up a sleeping wish? Was it the chance

to hurt made her feel the will to hurt? Or was the will always there—only wanting the chance?"

"We must think as we pray to think, Dodd. We must try to get charity into this, though 'tis cruel hard. Maybe 'twas but an accident and there's no inner meaning. You know he's a hot-headed young man. If he wants to make a stir and get well thought upon, why shouldn't he? There may be no malice in it."

"'Tis good to hear you," he said more gently. "For all I taught you to come to church, you're bigger-hearted than me really. But I was terrible fretted to hear Thatcher; though, for that matter, I've felt somehow since first this came up that 'twas all over. It cuts so many ways, even if Slanning was straight and she had nought to do with it. 'Tis bad enough and a serious throw-back to my future plans; but if she's at bottom, then that makes it ten thousand times worse."

"Take it for granted she's not, and it don't look so bad. And whether she be or no, what you said as we went down to church still holds."

"What did I say?"

"You was in one of your trustful, patient moods, when you'm at your strongest, my dear. You said, 'Whether it goes or remains, 'tis the will of my God.' And ban't that so still? Whether 'tis took for open high motives, or for secret wicked ones, the outlook is the same."

"Not so," he answered. "In the one case 'tis the fortune of war; in the other it means that I've still got an enemy as greedy and as patient as the grave. They're rich and she has her will always. This might happen again."

"Afeard? That's not like you. Ban't right on your side? Granted the worst: that this is her thought and worked for spite. What then? What's the end of the wicked? Whose will comes out top at the last? Trust your God. In the end ban't the man that does the wrong punished—not the man that suffers it? I scorn them! I pity them. Think what poison be in their hearts."

Her large views fortified him.

"Even such things I've said to you, and now my bread returns to me after many days," he answered. "I'll not scorn them—I'll not even blame them, Ilet. What's the good of being a working

Christian if the works get out of gear at the first strain? I'll go my way as I've gone it aforetime. I'll put a brave face on this reverse and read it as a healthy lesson. I'll not put one bad motive into them. I'll not think of her in the matter. I'll say that he has done a sensible thing with his money, and be among them to pat him on the back. What d'you think of that, Ilet?"

"'Tis what I knew you'd come to, Dodd."

"I've always been slow to think evil, and I always will be. There'll happen good out of this. Things was going along so well—too well."

"Things ought to go well when a man works like you work and has such a knack of pleasing people," she declared.

"'Tis a knack, as you say—a gift and, like all good gifts, from the same High Place. Here's Mrs. Pierce an' the little maid to meet us."

Old Henny happened to be staying with the Wolferstans for a month, to see how she liked it. In the event of her finding the life agreeable, it was understood that she would shortly come to live with them.

"You'm late," she cried, "so me an' baaby comed to meet 'e. The potatoes will all fall abroad if us ban't quick."

"Land's gone, mother," said Wolferstan.

"Oh, dear!—what ill fortune! I lay now you'll never find nought to suit 'e near enough to home; then you'll be off again."

"Don't think it. We stop here, and I hope you will also."

They discussed the situation during dinner, and afterwards husband and wife walked out together, and Mrs. Pierce made Abel's little daughter read out of her Bible. This was daily Sunday work, and the child had to learn a few words at the same time. Little Henny struggled with the long words and asked many questions. She was nearly five years old now, and had proved a very intelligent child.

Ilet walked with Dodd half way down the hill. He was going to his class.

She said a great thing as they parted.

"Mind and come back to tea. The Barkells walk over and Jane Perryman very likely. And, Dodd—'tis funny I should choose this minute, but I've put it off and off for fear I was

wrong ; and now I'll tell you. What you've hoped for is going to happen. There's a baby coming. That's good news, I suppose, for this morning's bad news, and it will make 'e cheerful company this evening, I hope. Say you'm glad—but well I know you are."

"Really and truly?"

"Not a doubt, Dodd."

"Praise God—praise God for it! I must put my arms round both of you! Here, come over this stile a minute into the field. I could shout and dance for joy! You clever woman! Do 'e see how Heaven balances a man's lot and don't give him more good or evil than he can bear at one time? Kiss me! Oh, Ilet, my dear, how small this do make the t'other thing! What's the loss of the garden to the winning of this? Let me tell 'em, mind. If they come afore I get back, say nought till I do."

He rattled on and immense joy sounded in his voice and looked out of his eyes. His class had an easy lesson. He forgave offences, laughed and jested, nearly told them that his wife was with child.

Then he strode up the hill again and arrived very hot and very happy. This day should be all good henceforward, because the thing that he had much desired was at last to happen. He had already affirmed his mind to disappointment and given up hope as the years passed: now the immense incentive of family was destined to crown his work and strengthen his arm. He would look at Pierce's daughter hungrily no more. There was coming one to build for; one to leave a name for; one who would be proud of his father and look to it that when the parent passed, the name of Dodd Wolferstan should not be forgotten.

His friends were assembled, and even Mr. Perryman, now recovered from illness, had driven over with his grand-daughter. But Dodd did not go first to them. He hurried up to his bedroom, washed his hot face, brushed his hair and then knelt down and thanked God with heartfelt fervour.

When he came among them, he delayed but a short time before proclaiming his great secret.

The matter of his garden he did not mention immediately, but presently Ilet broke the news and all expressed a lively interest.

Sorrow for Wolferstan was a little lost in excitement at the intelligence.

"'Tis his first step to becoming a public man," said Dicky. "They always begin so, if they've got money. Of course there may be another——" He broke off, conscious that Wolferstan need not be reminded of the possibilities that lurked behind this event.

"There ought to be compensation, and I should ax for it," said Mr. Perryman. "You've poured the fat of farmyards into that ground, and the lime you've put in was a wonder, not to name guano."

"'Tis bad luck—especially this minute, because there's a little one coming, you see," said Wolferstan with great affectation of indifference.

"Dash my old wig!" cried Abner Barkell. "Be there a thunder planet reigning? What with the funny weather and such a flood of news all to once, we live in a regular whirl of tidings. Good luck, Ilet! 'Tis a great and fine thing!"

"There," said old Henny, "and never told me a word of it! Do 'e hear that?" she asked the child on her lap. "A little dinky brother or sister for 'e!"

"Doan't want no bruvvers," said small Henny. "I doan't like li'l bwoys."

"Wish you both joy, I'm sure," declared Dicky.

"An' so do I," said Jane Perryman.

Ilet, a woman of no self-consciousness, thanked them all for their kind hopes.

"Good and bad have come to us at a breath," she said. "For 'tis very cruel hard us have to turn out of the garden; but my man here makes nought of it, since he's going to have his wish."

"And married four year next autumn," said Mrs. Pierce.

Perryman regarded Ilet respectfully.

"A shy bearer, ma'am; but so's some of the bestest fruit trees in the kingdom. Dodd here, as understands an apple second to no man, will tell the same. Take your Cornish Gillyflower—it wants a lot of management and a very tender hand with the pruning-knife—but what a mighty masterpiece when you get it! 'Tis fruit for a king; an' I hope 'twill be the same with you, I'm sure."

"If 'tis another as good and peart as Henny here, us shall do very well," said Mrs. Pierce.

"And so we shall," answered Dodd kindly, but hoping otherwise.

A great cheerfulness and gaiety settled upon them. They talked long and hopefully, and the visitors foretold smooth things.

Presently Perryman and his grand-daughter drove off in their little trap; Ilet remained at home; and Dodd, the Barkells and Mrs. Pierce, with little Henny, started for Meldon gorge. The old woman returned to her cottage that night, and Wolferstan carried her bundle while she had her grand-daughter by the hand. It was arranged on the spur of the moment that the child should stay at Fishcombe Cottage for a week, so that Wolferstan and his wife might be the more free to look about for ground. He attached importance to Ilet's judgment, and was loath to do anything without her help.

Now Abner walked beside Mrs. Pierce while his son and Wolferstan went ahead.

The younger men fell into argument according to their custom, and Dodd taxed the other.

"What can life be to you without faith? A pretty deadly thing, surely. I couldn't rise from my bed and tackle the day's work without it. No man's a right to stand up on his feet till he've begun the day on his knees—that's what my old father used to say. And a very proper rule too."

"I've my share of faith, for all your talk," said Dicky; "and hearing that you are going to have a child may make you tenderer to what I do believe in. I believe in the unborn—always have. That's where I put my trust. 'Tis one of the blots on life that we don't think more of what we owe them. You Christians with your maxims—why don't you do to the next generation as you would have them do to you? Ban't they our neighbours too?"

"And don't we think for them?"

"Devil a bit! What did I hear to Okehampton Station yesterday from the man himself? I mean that chap Luke Masters, the porter. His wife be in the lunatic asylum again after bearing him another child. Presently she'll be well and come out and breed once more. The law allows it! That's how much we think of the unborn. And a chap with sick lungs may marry a female with a weak head every day of the week if they like, and

the parsons will tell 'em to increase and multiply. And the law allows it. Think of the wicked, careless, cruel ignorance of that. All this we suffer smiling, and then, if a farmer sets a trap to prevent field vermin eating him out of house and home, we scream about it. We meet and babble and insult our betters, when wise men put a beast to pain for the sake of adding to human knowledge; but every year we let thousands of human creatures be bred into a lifetime of suffering and utter failure without a sigh."

"The sins of the fathers are visited on the children," said Wolferstan.

"I know it," answered the other. "And that's what human reason must alter by stopping the sins. It may be your precious God's plan to torture the innocent from the womb, and handicap his little ones with rickety bones and poisoned blood, because their fathers did evil; but we have grown saner and wiser—almost as sane and wise as the savages, who destroy their maimed and halt, and help Nature to hide her failures. She's far more merciful than man, for all the parrot cry against her cruelty."

"It's easy to talk," said Dodd; "but how are you going to interfere with the liberty of the subject and tell people that they shall not marry?"

"I wouldn't do any such thing," answered the signalman. "Let them marry if they want to. That's their affair; but children is the race's affair, and it should be very clearly understood that no male or female has liberty to breed trash. 'Tis bad husbandry to breed from faulty cattle; 'tis bad humanity to breed from faulty humans. Surely any sane soul can see that? And yet every day of the week rotten men and women are coupled, and the law's too weak to stop it. Why don't we take as much trouble to make the next generation as we do any other crockery ware? Why don't we see that to bring life into the world is as serious as to put it out? For that matter, the parents that get a quiver full of weak, useless children are worse than murderers; and I'd punish them worse. Penal servitude should they get for the deed—both of 'em! Let them that come after to fight the hard battle start clean, whole, healthy—or not at all. Look round you, Wolferstan, and read some of the figures you'll find in the papers. Think a bit and put two and two together, same as I do. We muzzle dogs for a few years and hydrophobia's

a thing of the past. If we muzzled bad breeders for a generation or two—what then? Why, instead of spending millions—*millions*, mind you—on our insane paupers, we should find lunacy going down instead of going up. Them to come will blush that half the world was mad in the twentieth century, and the other half wasn't ashamed of it."

"You leave religion out of your calculations as usual."

"Not I. What I'm saying be a sight more religious than your imbecile way. The religious man and the humane man nowadays is the man of science, who seeks truth and stands up for sanity before all else. I'm religious enough, and if I had had a pinch of fire mixed with my clay, I should have been a preacher and worked out my few years in trying to help the world to be clean. I'd have preached sweet air and sweet water and sweet brains; I'd have tried to teach my kind that liberty can't be in a world bound about with iron laws. I'd have told 'em of a greater thing than liberty, and that's work. But there 'tis—I'm too idle. If you could give me a spark of your zeal, I might light a little fire with it; but I've got no fire of my own. I'm cold—bloodless—useless—built for a looker-on. I work train signals. But I see others."

Behind them came Mrs. Pierce, Mr. Barkell and the child. Dodd and Dicky had quickened their pace and the rest were far in the rear.

"'Tis an eternal mystery how the Book do throw light on everything," said old Henny. "Just to-day, after the bad news came, what should I be reading with my little tibby-lamb here but Proverbs. A chapter a Sunday us get through; and to-day 'twas the twenty-third; and what did I find there? 'Remove not the old landmark, and enter not into the fields of the fatherless'! Somebody did ought to send that verse to the man—Mr. Slanning, I mean."

"I'm afraid it wouldn't shake him. Us must larn the young youths to shoot straight, for our lives depend upon it with all the nations raging against us—according to the 'Western Morning News'."

"And my brave maiden here larned her bit, as she do every Sunday, so that her shall have a good store of Bible wisdom saved against her grows up and comes to want it," continued the old woman.

"Ah! an' what have she got to-day then?"

"Tell your text, dearie," said the grandmother; and little Henny instantly stood still, put her hands behind her and lifted her eyes to the immense sky.

"'Buy the truth, and sell it not'," she piped.

"Good—very good," declared Mr. Barkell. "Here's a penny for 'e, my darlin'. I ordained to put it in the dish to church an' forgot. There's nought in nature I like better than a big text in a li'l mouth."

CHAPTER VII

A SALE OF STOCK

WITH the actual business of leaving his old ground, Wolferstan began to see the gravity of the circumstance. As the days went by and fresh complications arose, he perceived how far-reaching was this stroke. Ilet alone had sympathy with him. The rest of his little world—not concerned to hear that this eminently successful man had received a set back—displayed their feeling on the subject in applause for Orlando Slanning. His action tended indirectly to better Okehampton, for the town would henceforth possess the best rifle range within a wide radius. It became known also that many important future competitions might be set for decision there.

Wolferstan concealed his chagrin as well as he could, and betrayed little bitterness save in the company of his wife.

Together they set to work and visited such ground as they could hear about, but the quest proved ineffective, and as day by day Dodd failed to find the ideal land within possible distance of his home, he became strengthened in a secret resolve. Returning with Ilet from the deep meadows by Oke under Halstock, he broached the subject.

"It's more and more in me to drop this line altogether and try beasts. There's a lot to be said for 'em. Here I am, a Moor-man with Venville rights, and all those beautiful lairs under Mil Tor as open to me as anybody; yet I only keep a few beggarly sheep. My own impression is, Ilet, that there's a Providence in this business, and I'm not meant to have ground no more. At any rate not at present. Think how 'twould be if I could speak of my cattle up over, like many another farmer. And there's this to be said, mind: 'twould free my time something tremendous. With a garden, one has got to be in it all day long, and, as I've

stooped over the dirty work, I've often asked myself whether I ought not to be at something higher. And no land turns up. So I shan't look any more. I shall go into farming a bit larger. You know how the pigs paid. Well, I mean to have twice as many and try a good strain of Indian game, instead of all this mixed poultry we keep; and——"

"Where's the money coming from, Dodd?"

"To be plain, I must borrow a bit."

"I don't like that."

"More do I like it—yet there's times when every man who looks far ahead may be called upon to raise a few hundred."

"'Tis such hand to mouth with us. I don't see what there is to borrow it on."

He frowned.

"You oughtn't to say things like that. You know what I've got in the bank."

"Then why not use a bit of that?"

"That would be false wisdom to touch capital just now. My money's my security. If I could make money for Alexander Horn, as I did do—why not for myself? I understand things* as well as him, and 'tis bigger work, when all's said, than market gardening."

"Do what's best in your eyes, Dodd. You know what you plan I'll help to carry out to the last step."

"So I do. Then we'll drop this land-hunting and look up some tidy red cattle come autumn. 'Twill suit me a lot better, and I'm very glad you feel as you do about it. 'Twill take me a deal more upon the Moor, and that will be good for my health."

They talked themselves into a hopeful vein, and for a week were cheerful and busy with the new plans. But difficulties stood in the way. The nursery proved a very serious loss. Wolferstan held sales there from time to time, and each brought worse prices than the last.

His new seedling onion, on which he had counted to make twenty pounds, fetched no more than ten. From a sanguine mood he turned to a sour one, and exhibited impatience and even petulance. His wife stared aghast at this spectacle and tried in

* *Things*—sheep and cattle.

vain to rally him. For three days he remained under a cloud and once or twice took long rides upon Dartmoor alone. Then it passed: he expressed supreme contrition and prayed God for forgiveness. He went to church and recovered his spirits and temper.

Now arose the matter of buying stock and raising money necessary to the purpose. Wolferstan was gratified to find the latter process easy. He had a few hundred pounds saved, and easily raised as much again at a reasonable rate. A sale in Cornwall attracted him, and on the appointed day he donned his market clothes, put his cheque book in his pocket, bade Ilet wish him good luck, and started to Marhamchurch by Bude. At Ashbury, Slanning entered the railway carriage. Orlando was late and he had just time to tumble into Dodd's smoking compartment as the train gathered speed.

His concern and discomfort were evident, but he quickly controlled them, brought a cigar case from his pocket and began to smoke. While he read 'The Sportsman,' Wolferstan had leisure to note him. A sudden impulse to speak overtook the elder man.

"Pardon me," he said, "but I should like to be among those to congratulate you on your public spirit. You did Okehampton and the Rifle Association a real good turn by buying that ground, and I'm glad to see by the papers that you've been thanked as you ought to be. You'll know I speak without prejudice, for the business made a good bit of trouble for me. But 'tis the greatest good to the greatest number we've always got to think about."

Slanning strove for a moment not to answer, but he lacked the moral strength of purpose necessary to cut a man at such close quarters. He hesitated a moment, then replied.

"Thank you—yes. It's made a bit of a stir, I believe. But I felt called to do it, with my strong views on army questions. Sorry about your nursery garden—really. But I dare say you'll find better ground somewhere about."

"I'm not going on with that. For many things I'm not sorry to leave the valley, though it wasn't the time I should have chosen. But I'm going in for breeding."

"Ah!—you know a lot about it?"

"Thanks to Mr. Horn."

"Yes, he's the greatest authority in these parts. Why, I'm on a commission for him to Marhamchurch this minute! A lot of young bullocks and heifers for sale there. He saw them last week, and is rather sweet on them. 'Tis a quiet sale, and he hopes to get a bargain."

"That's funny," said Dodd. "I'm bound there myself on the same errand."

"The deuce you are! Well, now you know he wants 'em——?"

There was a pause. Then Wolferstan answered slowly—

"You see, Mr. Horn lost confidence in me, and it was one of the greatest regrets of my life when he did so. We needn't go into that. I always felt, and always shall feel deep respect for him."

"I should think so. Who doesn't?"

"A sterling, honourable man. I wouldn't do anything to annoy him. If he wants the things——"

"My dear fellow," interrupted the other rather insolently, "don't make a virtue of necessity. If he wants the things, you may take it from me that he'll have them. I tell you I'm going to bid for them."

Wolferstan, who had hoped something from this meeting, was nettled at the other's attitude.

"With his money, I suppose? He didn't give you the liberty to pay any price, did he? It happens that these beasts may be worth a bit more to me just now than they would be to Farmer Horn. What then?"

Orlando chuckled and put up his glass.

"Well, a thing is worth what it will fetch. All the same, I shall buy the stock for my father-in-law, so if that's all your errand, Wolferstan, you may just as well get out at the next station and go home."

"I won't do that. Out of respect to him I would have withdrawn, but since you speak so uncivil, I shall go on. He would not praise you for being impertinent to another man."

Orlando grew red. To have his manners rebuked by the son of a hedge-mender offended him.

"When I want to know how to behave—don't talk to me, please. You seem to forget your company rather. 'Impertinent', indeed! Didn't you call me 'poor Slanning' five or six years ago? You to talk! I don't know how you had

the cheek to speak to me at all. You ought to know your place better."

"So I ought," said the other. "You're right there—though not often right, I reckon. I ought to know my place is a long sight higher than yours. What's money? What is it to have yourself plastered with loud clothes and to buy ground that you may stand in it and blow your own trumpet? Why, all a common, low-minded man's work. You bought my land so that people should shout and call you a fine fellow. I pity you now, as I always have done. If you bought the house over my head and the clothes off my back—if I was in the workhouse and you lord of the manor, I should still pity you; because you're a self-sufficient, boasting fool. But don't you meddle with me, because no man shall do that and not come off second best."

"You think so? That's what 'tis to be a modest man—eh? I'm a boasting fool; you're a wise Solomon. You noisy dog—to talk to a soldier so! Men have been spitted for less in Germany. Why, good God!—you—a road-mender's son or some such thing, to dare!"

Another man entered the carriage and Wolferstan left it.

He had grown cool by the time he reached Bude and regretted his foolish anger very sincerely. He marvelled at himself that an insolent stare through an eyeglass and the silly word of a vain man should have had power to waken such a tempest of anger.

The distance to Marhamchurch was not great, and presently, as they went thither on foot, Orlando and Dodd were elbow to elbow again.

Slanning had also grown calmer. He was in a triumphant mood and already longed to be telling his wife of his brilliant and successful encounter.

"Look here," said Wolferstan. "I'm sorry for what happened just now—real sorry. I was the fool—not you. I didn't mean a word of it. Just a bit of temper for which I'm ashamed. I hope you'll pardon me, though I don't deserve it."

"Now you're talking sense. Let it go. I've got rather a sharp tongue when I'm roused. Say no more. As to this sale—well, let the bidding take its way."

Then a man of Slanning's acquaintance rode up, and the miller paid no more attention to Wolferstan.

At the sale Orlando bid over Dodd on two occasions—a fact that would not have troubled Wolferstan but for the other's noisy and offensive manner. A few men round the auctioneer laughed as Mr. Horn's son-in-law cried guineas to Wolferstan's pounds, and Dodd began to perceive that the incidents in the railway carriage had been retailed before the sale began. His heart grew hot again and, when a lot of four upon which he was specially bent came under the hammer, he had lost a little of his self-control. A good many besides Slanning and himself were interested now, and bidding waxed pretty brisk for some time. But man after man fell out until only two were left. Slanning and Wolferstan pushed up the price against each other; the owner chuckled; the auctioneer became interested. The value of the lot was now exceeded, but still they bid. A buzz of voices sounded round them, and both were warm; yet, for once, Slanning was the cooler man.

Suddenly, to Wolferstan's last rise, no answer came and the hammer fell. Laughter rather than applause greeted the incident, and a moment later Slanning's voice was lifted loudly. He felt very considerable relief.

"That's all ten pounds more than they are worth! And the man that's bought 'em thinks he knows a bit! Ha, ha! And what commission am I going to have, Mr. Heard, for pushing your calves up like that?"

Wolferstan made necessary arrangements and withdrew. His performance occasioned wide comment. That a man who understood cattle should have done this thing, looked mysterious. Then it was bruited that Wolferstan did not want the stock, but had purchased out of animosity to Mr. Horn. Rumours spread; lies were told and not contradicted. The general impression grew that for some secret spite of his old master, the late Portreeve of Bridgestowe had bid against him. A malignant interpretation was put upon his folly; but that it was a simple case of lost temper none imagined.

Wolferstan returned, miserable and ashamed, to his wife. He told her everything, and she spoke generous words of comfort. She heartened him; and before nightfall he had written to Alexander Horn.

In this last matter he bettered his wife's instruction, for while Ilet merely advised him to express regret and to explain that a

foolish anger had made him err, Dodd wrote much more. He entered into full particulars, described Slanning's conduct and the anger which it awoke in himself, and ended by offering to let Mr. Horn have the cattle at the price of Orlando's final bid.

The stock remained with Wolferstan, however, for he received no answer to his letter.

CHAPTER VIII

BREAKING THE NEWS

WHEN Orlando went home he told his story with exaggeration. The dialogue with Wolferstan he wrongly narrated, as all dialogues are wrongly narrated in rehearsal, but the substance was true, and his wife felt acute interest. As for Mr. Horn, he was not heard to utter a word upon the subject when these incidents came to his ears.

The married life of Primrose needs no very special details of description. She lived as she had lived at home, spent much of her time in the saddle, and was openly regretful and secretly glad that she had no children. Her life ran in the old grooves. She hunted, enjoyed herself after her kind, and made a very perfect wife for Slanning. Him she controlled with ease, humoured, and, by humouring, dominated in all things, without appearing to do so.

She watched Wolferstan calmly and her purposes with regard to him were absolutely unchanged. She was in no haste, and after the scene at the Agricultural Show, let him advance for years without moving to hurt him. Then the rifle ranges and the talk about them gave her an easy opportunity, and she took it. She had not intended to do more for the present; but Wolferstan's circumstances and his meeting with her husband quickened her reptilian patience. That he was going to raise cattle and abandon market gardening interested her. And that he had begun by paying too much for stock, told her a great deal more than it told Orlando. She was surprised to find this, her first serious blow, had struck so deep. The anger of Wolferstan and his loss of temper, already argued a different Wolferstan from him she had known so intimately. She began to wonder whether, after all, it was the deprivation of his land that had

changed him, or whether he was indeed deteriorating under the strain of life. That seemed improbable so soon. She chose the more likely solution. She knew how exceedingly insolent Orlando could be when he chose, and felt very little doubt, even allowing for false statements in his recital, that he had angered Dodd past bearing in the railway carriage, and nettled him to folly at the sale. But there was a time when no man of her husband's calibre would have had the power to anger Wolferstan. Therefore she suspected that his old self-repression was at least shaken, and she asked herself again if life, and perhaps his wife, had so far changed him, or if the stroke of losing his nursery garden had done the harm.

It mattered little enough, since the fact remained ; and yet she liked not to think he was going down without her help. Upon this point subsequent events enlightened her. Wolferstan borrowed money and bought more cattle with it. That he had borrowed was not generally known, that he had become a grazier all men learnt. Thus he won a reputation for greater wealth than he possessed, and, after a few denials, he ceased to contradict reports and let the matter go. He found that in most quarters to be credited with money is worth the real thing, and he looked forward confidently to paying back his loan at the appointed time. He bought a new horse and, thanks to the fact of war, made a considerable sum of money over other transactions involving horses. As the year turned and autumn approached, the man's prospects became brighter, and a crowning triumph was the winning of a seat on the Okehampton Town Council. This he did as a Conservative, defeating the Progressive candidate who stood against him by a narrow majority.

He took his new duties in a very serious spirit and spared no pains to perform them. He worked exceedingly hard, yet found time to add a new pleasure to his life and began to hunt a little after the fashion of many Moorland men. The small holders are often sportsmen, and at any Dartmoor meet many a rough rider on a rough pony swells the throng. Their horses make up in cleverness what they lack of speed, and the Moor-man's knowledge of the ground ensures him good share of sport. But Wolferstan regarded his new amusement partly in the nature of an advertisement, and went neatly attired on a good horse. His

taste in the matter of clothes did not fail him. He always looked well and always appeared prosperous and cheerful.

Ilet favoured the sport, for it heartened Dodd and he invariably returned from the Moor in a cheerful and sanguine mood. His cattle came on well, and already he looked forward to the autumn sales. The prospect of profit was fair; and, all things considered, he had reason to hope. So it came about that the loss of the market garden appeared after all but a blessing in disguise.

Ilet also prospered, and their united life emerged from the cloud brighter and hopefuller by contrast. Success always made Wolferstan prayerful; he increased in devoutness now and spent no little time with efforts to help others on the way.

The institution for working men which he had been instrumental in founding, languished largely at this season, and, after a long argument with Ilet, Dodd spent ten pounds upon it with a view to increasing its attractions.

Thus stood their lives, when incident overtook them.

It happened on a day in autumn that Wolferstan went cub-hunting at a very early hour. The meet was at Halstock, near his own home, and he found a considerable number gathered together under Halstock Wood, including several strangers from Okehampton on hired horses. Two ladies were also of the company: Primrose Slanning and the wife of the Master.

Wolferstan had seen the Slannings at several meets before this occasion, but no notice was taken on either side.

To-day he arrived a little late and hounds were just going to cover. They found quickly and soon their fox took them into the fresh glory of sunrise on the Moor. Wolferstan was well placed and his horse was fresh. Where the little Blackavon falls into Oke the fox turned right handed, passed behind Harter Farm, then, still keeping to the right, followed Blackavon's windings under Curters Clitters, and so held straight on, over the heavy ground to the east of Dinger Tor. The pace was very fast, and presently the huntsman, two hundred yards behind hounds, and half a dozen riders, a hundred yards or more behind him, were separated from the rest of the straggling field by a quarter of a mile. Wolferstan, a slightly built young man on a big bay, another stranger, the Slannings, the Master and a friend of the latter, made up the van. Then hounds turned left

handed, crossed a wall and got into the heavy morasses under Okement Hill. No horses could live with them here; the field gained a little ground on the leaders; but the hunt disappeared.

Then it was that Primrose got into difficulties in some very boggy ground, and her husband came to her aid. Wolferstan and others kept to the right, where he knew there was firm going, and the huntsman, whose knowledge of the Moor was not equal to Dodd's, rode beside him. They kept on over Okement Hill and then hounds were sighted racing towards Taw Head.

Not until half an hour later did those behind see a rider returning as fast as he could gallop. He drew up near Slanning and shouted for a doctor; but unfortunately none was out, and he galloped on. The man had been well up from the first, and was mounted on an Okehampton mare belonging to a livery stable keeper of that town. But though this horse was familiar to those round him, the rider no one knew.

"What's wrong?" shouted Slanning; and the stranger cried out, "Bad fall jumping. One brought down the other—all up, I'm afraid—my brother—a chap called Wolferstan——" The rest of his speech was lost as he retreated; but the name of Wolferstan had been clearly heard.

A few rode on swiftly and one kindly man, who believed that a doctor was stopping at Belstone, turned his horse away and started for that village, knowing it to be closer than Okehampton.

The field scattered and some had already fallen out. Slanning rode on, and a few moments later Primrose found herself alone. This she desired, for now her thoughts woke into very acute activity. What had happened she did not know. The frantic man on the horse showed by his manner that he was in great tribulation. He had mentioned his brother and a bad, perhaps fatal, accident. He had also named Wolferstan.

"An instinct at this juncture made the woman turn sharply from the line of riders, take her horse to the right and gallop away alone under Dinger Tor into the valley of the West Oke. She did not wish to hear more particulars of the accident. She had learned enough and preferred to remain in doubt of details. Her reasons were evil and she reflected how best to profit by this

mishap. If Wolferstan was dead, that ended it, and she had not after all been 'in at the death', as once she had sworn to be. Then the hunt was over and the secret sauce to life had run dry. But she hoped otherwise. The man had named his brother with a faltering voice. How to win something for herself out of this accident was the problem, and her mind worked swiftly upon it. By the time that she had reached Black Tor Copse, a plan was matured. She passed on horseback beside the stone where Wolferstan sat when he prayed Ilet to be his wife. The atmosphere of this spot seemed to quicken thought in the huntress. As she passed into the valley and rode by the cottage of Henny Pierce, her line of action became clear. She proceeded still by the river, then climbed again up the steep ways of the Redavon and kept her eyes open for the thing she needed.

There was no time to waste now, for she had made a wide detour from the scene of the accident, and others, returning more directly, might carry the truth with them.

The desired object met her gaze and a man confronted her. She frowned, for he was old and a slow mover. But if he started immediately, under Black Down and through the artillery camp, he might reach the house of Dodd Wolferstan within an hour. The time was now after nine o'clock and a splendid autumn morn made glad the fading world.

It was old Abner Barkell whom Primrose happened to meet, and her words disclosed her purpose. She did not know him and spoke swiftly.

"There's been an accident with hounds, my good man. It would be well if some news of it was taken quickly. Can you earn a half-crown? Do you know the house where Mr. Wolferstan lives near the artillery camp?"

"Dodd Wolferstan? Yes, ma'am. But for God's sake don't say nothing's happened to him?"

"I'm afraid the worst. The details I don't know, but they fear it's fatal. It would be a good thing if just a hint could be given to his poor wife—to break it."

"Oh, my God! And her in—I couldn't—I couldn't do it, ma'am. The dreadfulness of the ways of Providence! Why, her first was laid low—there's a fatal—don't ax me—I——"

Abner fairly ran away down the hill. One hand held a stick ;

he wrung the other as he stumbled forward. She cried after him, but he neither answered nor looked back.

Time sped and the woman stood quite still for five minutes. Then she rode forward to do her work herself.

She was justified in assuming that Wolferstan was dead, or at any rate badly injured. Humanity indicated that to break the news to his wife would be a reasonable and proper thing. If he were indeed dead, her action must be considered worthy of a woman ; if not—then the mistake could only be pardoned ; but much might come of the mistake.

She spurred her horse, rounded Black Down and galloped through the valley beneath it. Presently she came out under the artillery camp, passed the Moor gate and rode towards the house of Wolferstan, where it stood high on the hill overlooking Okehampton. As she left the Moor, far on her right she saw the flash of the huntsman's pink and the twinkle of the hounds. Scattered figures were close by, some on foot, some on horseback. In their midst a little knot of men clustered and she saw that they carried a hurdle. She was in plenty of time.

A small iron wicket opened from Wolferstan's house on to the high road. Here Primrose dismounted ; then made fast her horse, gathered up her habit, and went round to the front door of the dwelling, which opened northward under a little verandah. She knocked loudly and Ilet herself answered the summons.

Primrose was familiar with the other's condition. It had entered into her calculations, and did not come as a surprise. As she looked at her, she remembered, as a strange coincidence, that on the last occasion of their meeting, now five years ago, Ilet was also with child.

Wolferstan's wife flushed and took a step backward at this sudden and most unexpected apparition. Then she came forward with questioning face.

She was just preparing her husband's breakfast, for he had told her that he should be home soon after nine.

"Forgive me for troubling you—I've ridden fast and I'm somewhat unstrung. An accident—I felt it was only human to try and come to you if I could, before—— I asked an old man, but his courage failed him—therefore I came myself. When I heard,

I rode away—then I decided to let you know. You must be brave about it ; but you must be prepared——”

Still Ilet listened without speaking.

“An accident out on the Moor. I haven’t heard particulars, but the trouble is very serious—terribly so—and Mr. Wolferstan—they are bringing him over the Moor now. I felt if a woman’s—I’m so very, very sorry——”

Abel Pierce’s child ran out, and seeing a stranger, hid her face in her mother’s gown.

Ilet continued silent and Primrose prepared to depart.

“It may not be the worst,” she said, “but if it had happened to me, I should have been thankful to be prepared—and so I have done for another woman, what I should have thanked another woman for doing to me.”

Still the other said nothing. Then Primrose departed. She had not heard Ilet’s voice ; but she had seen the tremendous force of the blow fall fair and square. For a moment the younger wife was dazed. Then she heard Mrs. Slanning ride off and turned to do.

There was no time to think, and she had no desire to think. All that went to the death of her first husband poured through her mind. She lived the moments again. She ran up to their bed—dragged the clothes from it, and made a soft couch on the parlour sofa ; she cleared the parlour table of little trifles and opened the window to let in air. She went for fresh water and put out a glass and a bottle of spirits. She moved with immense strength and fortitude, and waited with nerves strung up and perfect self-control for the blow to fall. Presently she heard voices and the thud of horses’ hoofs and the shouting of directions.

A crowd was coming down the hill and they carried a litter.

Almost her last conscious act was to open the little iron gate for them and set a stone against it to keep it open.

Then Wolferstan, safe and sound, hurried up to her.

“You !” she said.

“All right, thank God ; but——”

To his astonishment his wife lifted her arms wildly to him, then, before he could catch her, she rolled over in a heap at his feet.

Five minutes later she lay on the bed that she had made ready

for her husband, and a doctor, who was walking beside the hurdle, left it, for a case more immediately urgent.

Wolferstan and a young man on a hired horse had collided and come down together at a jump. Dodd was uninjured; the visitor had broken his leg. He was badly hurt, but in no peril of life.

CHAPTER IX

ORLANDO IS DISLOYAL

IT went hardly with Ilet and what Dodd's destruction might not have done, his safety effectually accomplished. Her labour was in vain, and for some days she suffered danger of death.

The subsequent illness was very long and very trying.

The strain told heavily upon Dodd Wolferstan. The expense of Ilet's illness weighed nothing with him, and he spent more money than was actually necessary, in food which she could not eat, and in books which she cared not to read; but the lasting evil was of the mind, and upon the man's temper there fell impressions that no time nor change, nor return of happiness might eradicate. From the first he read a definite meaning into the action of Primrose. He put an evil and a true interpretation upon her deed, and although Ilet herself protested, and his little circle cried out against such a dark opinion, steadfastly he held that the wife of Orlando Slanning had taken her message in malice with deliberate intention to work mischief. He had asked the brother of the injured man the nature of the words he uttered, and he had interrogated others who also heard them. It seemed clear to him that, though his name had been mentioned, there was nothing to justify the subsequent assumption of Primrose. Others, who had also heard, confessed that they had not reached the same conclusion, but none denied that such an impression might have reasonably entered the mind of a listener. None blamed Mrs. Slanning, save only Dodd and Richard Barkell. The latter found this event fit with his own theory and prediction. He had foretold that the woman would prove a life-long enemy; therefore, naturally, he accepted events that seemed to support his opinion. He alone tolerated Dodd's dark suspicions; but his attitude proved of little comfort to the sufferer.

A month after Ilet's illness she received a letter from the woman who was responsible for it. Primrose wrote with affection of sorrow for her error and the unfortunate issue. She added that her mistake was natural under the circumstances, but that none the less she should always greatly regret it to her dying day, in so far as the robbed mother was concerned. The father she did not mention.

Wolferstan would not let his wife answer the letter, but took it to Barkell to read. The signalman had little to say upon it, however.

"'Twas only part of the game that she should do this," he remarked. "What luck the wicked do have, to be sure! Nought could have fallen patter for her than this business."

"She's robbed me of my child and worse. She might have robbed me of my wife also. If that had happened, I'd . . . But there 'tis. Ilet wanted to answer this and I wouldn't let her. 'Tis a marvel to me, after all that's fallen out, but my woman, lying wrecked there, won't even now see the truth. Not a shadow of blame does she throw on t'other—says it might have happened to her herself. And that though she knows all the past."

"Your wife is built so," answered old Barkell. "She thinks a thing through and then sticks to it for right or wrong. If she's made up her mind that Mrs. Slanning meant good and not evil, not cherubims from the sky would shake her. And I think 'tis a noble and gracious thing and a great lesson to all of us. But for God's mercy and my own wits I might have taken the message myself. It had to be: 'twas planned that your little one wasn't to open his eyes on this troublesome world. What was she but a minister and a mouthpiece? I don't know that you've got any call to read bad motives myself. 'Tis so terrible easy to read 'em into human affairs. But 'tis a very bad habit, Dodd, and does a lot of harm to the heart that gets in the way of it."

"I know that well enough. D'you think I didn't smart when I caught myself doing so? But Ilet is blind, and if I was blind too, we should both fall over the precipice together presently. Look how things are. How does it happen that in every bad stroke that's fallen on me since my marriage, you can find that woman? Answer that. Look back and mark how true it is. Now, with my eyes open, I can see her hand all through."

"Forewarned you are. Then don't give her no more chances," said Dicky.

But Wolferstan turned impatiently from him.

"Easy to talk like a book when you're safe as a book, and dead as a book, and beyond reach of hurt. How am I going to stop her? What can I do?"

"You might go to her."

"And fall on my knees, perhaps, and beg her to let me off?"

"Not that. Maybe she doesn't know you've found her out."

"And wouldn't it add just that pinch of salt to her life if she knew I had? I'll not let her think—and yet—of course she knows that I see it. I'm not a fool."

"She's made it clear enough," said Dicky; "but can't two play at the game?"

"Don't listen to him, Dodd," implored Abner Barkell. "Don't heed that heathen man. This is where right and religion come on. Listen to your wife and your own conscience. Walk up-rightly in this ticklish place. Put on the whole armour of righteousness, for you never needed it more. Let your wife answer the letter. Ilet's great generous faith will shame her, even if she's so bad as you think her."

"Never! They've left my letters unanswered. They've thrown my gifts back in my face. There is such a thing as self-respect. You forget that."

"There are times when 'tis better forgotten," answered the old man.

"What a mean-spirited old chap you are, father!"

"Not at all, Richard. The high hoss is uneasy riding for poor folk. These here people have the power to hurt, and if they've got the will too, as Dodd believes, then self-respect ban't the weapon to fight 'em with. A soft answer turneth away wrath. If they've got a grudge against Dodd here, better far he should go to 'em in Christian patience and find out what's the matter and clear it up, and start fresh."

"If I'm not stronger than a wicked woman and a brainless fool, it's a pity," said Dodd.

"Granted she is wicked," answered Abner. "Mind, I'm not saying she is, or thinking she is; but I'll allow for the minute that she be. Then you've got two against you without the man, namely, her and the Devil her master. Well, with the Devil

against us we'm lost unless God's our side. Nobody knows that better than you. So there it stands, and you've got to call on your Maker to show you I'm right. Humble pie don't taste nice, but it never gave nobody but a fool indigestion. 'Tis very nourishing food to the Christian spirit. You let Ilet answer that letter as she wants to answer it, and see what happens."

"There—that's good advice, I do think," added Dicky. "'Twill be a lasting surprise to the woman, for I'll bet a week's wages she says to herself you won't let Ilet answer."

"You wasn't used to be proud," continued Abner; "'twas your stronghold of character, Dodd—the modesty of you. Don't go an' get proud just at the wrong minute, my dear man."

Wolferstan laughed bitterly.

"By God! not much to be proud of, I grant you. Wriggling like a worm on a hook. To be under her heel helpless and stand here reduced to anger and bad words. Did you hear me swear then?"

"'Tis out of your character, no doubt, to take the Name like that—such a religious man."

Wolferstan looked at Dicky, but his friend did not speak.

"She shan't answer the letter, anyway," he said; "but I'm not sure I won't go and see the woman face to face."

He left them upon this determination, yet changed it before a week had passed. Then the matter went out of his mind, for much else occupied it. The winter was hard and long; the expenses of keeping his cattle, during the season when they could not be on the Moor, proved considerable. Minor anxieties also busied him. Once, before dawn, Ilet grew very unwell and he hurried for the medical man. Dr. Hext arrived and quickly found that his patient must be taken to Exeter and undergo operation.

She could have no more children.

Wolferstan took this cold news out of the house with him and stood in front of his door under the first light of a January day. He looked at the winter world outspread; then turned his face to the sky where morning, like an army, rolled along the purple horizons of the East under points and streamers of fire.

Ilet quite filled his thoughts and this new fear for her; but he had not buried desire for children in the grave of his still-born infant. He was for a time too busy to think of the cause of this

misfortune. Then it returned to him, and dull rage smouldered up in his spirit, as now it often did.

Presently the noise of a cart fell upon his musings, and it stopped at the gate. A moment later the driver hammered at the back door and he heard old Henny's voice within.

"Tell that man to be quiet, Dodd. Let be getting off to sleep now."

He went out and found a carter with a square wooden case addressed to him. There was nothing to pay, and the man departed, leaving Wolferstan gazing idly at the box. He could not tell whence it came and expected no such thing. The direction was in a large, loose, hopeful hand that he did not know.

Dodd got a hammer and chisel and opened the box. It contained twelve bottles of port wine and a letter. For a moment the gift warmed him and he felt it a blessed thing in that dark hour thus to be reminded that he had friends who thought of his sorrow. Then he read the letter and the heat of his heart turned from love to wrath.

"SLANNING's, 3 Jan.

"DEAR WOLFERSTAN,

"I was very sorry to hear about your trouble with your wife, and at this season of the year, though old-fashioned, we feel a bit sorrier for people down in their luck than at other times. I expect feeding up and all that sort of thing is necessary, and I'm sending a dozen bottles of good stuff—old port—which I'll back against doctor's trash any day. You needn't acknowledge the wine—in fact, you'd better not. I was damned sorry about the child, for I've got none either and know what it is to want 'em. Though a soldier myself, I'm a man who likes to be friendly with people, and so I hope you'll take this in the spirit it is meant. Don't answer this. You can speak to me next time we meet alone, if you like. Nobody knows about this wine.

"Yours, O. SLANNING.

"P.S.—I'm taking this to Okehampton to send along with the liquor."

Thus the amiable fool had written, and thus he had done, when his wife's back was turned. The audacity of such a deed Dodd could not estimate, but much reflection and some courage had gone to it. Life had touched even this noisy and silly soul to gentleness at some points. He much desired offspring, and to

see another man thus robbed of his child had moved his heart. He told himself in secret that he would proceed no more against Wolferstan. He was exceedingly frightened at what had been done, and his wife's private satisfaction also rendered him unquiet. He feared an hour of retribution. Impressions, however, never lasted long with him, and Primrose ignored his protests, well knowing that they arose from emotion and not conviction. But he, while the remorseful fit was on him, cast about how to atone in some sort for the wrong; and he fell back upon ~~the~~ idea of a gift and despatched it in secret from Okehampton.

Wolferstan regarded the bottles and the letter. He had opened the case in a scullery adjoining his kitchen, and now, suddenly, he picked a bottle from the straw, took it to the sink, snapped off the head and let the wine run away. With the second and third he did the same; then, holding the fourth, he stopped and asked himself what he was about. He felt his heart throbbing, and knew that rage ruled him like a slave. The smell of the wine seemed to increase it; and the unconsciousness of his own folly was the last ingredient in that pitiful mood. He believed this act of Slanning's to be a deadly insult; and he did not stop to read the real significance of the letter. His judgment was poisoned; his passion held him; but he made no effort to control it. Conscious of the smell of the liquor, he went into the air with the rest, and flung bottle after bottle at a granite post, until a great black pool reflected the red sky and much splintered glass glittered in the light of the morning.

Then, even as he broke the final bottle, great contrition touched him, and abundant shame flooded his soul. None had seen his madness, but he felt the eye of his God upon him, and the sense of his own littleness and feebleness crushed him to the earth. He cleared up the glass, threw sand over the spilt wine, then returned to his house and read Slanning's letter again. Now he saw the virtue in it as well as the vanity. He guessed that Slanning felt more kindly; he understood that even this empty man could grow soft for desire of a child.

Wolferstan's mind leapt to penance and he asked himself what he must do to punish himself for his offence. He had committed a series of crimes in the space of ten minutes. He had misread another's action; he had cursed a well-meaning fellow-

creature ; he had lost his temper utterly and, like an unreasoning brute, destroyed valuable and precious things. The liquid that might have brought strength to sick creatures ; the generous wine, with all its power to lift up and soothe and strengthen, was in the dust. He would never have let his wife drink it ; but that was no reason why it should go undrunk. He felt the necessity for repairing this waste. Wine of exactly similar quality must be drunk by those who could not afford to buy it. Only so was it possible to let Slanning's good action answer its purpose.

He returned to the broken glass and found that the bottles were not labelled. Then he looked at the case and saw the name of an Okehampton tradesman thereon.

Thither he went later in the day, and presently sent a dozen bottles of the port to the workhouse, in Orlando Slanning's name. At the same time he left a letter with the wine merchant, that Orlando might receive it without his wife's knowledge.

But satisfaction at its receipt gave place to astonishment when the other learnt how his gift of wine had been handed to the poor. First he was angry with Wolferstan ; then, dimly perceiving the propriety of the act, he was pleased. He feared his wife might get to hear of it, but she only learnt, as the rest of their world learnt, that Orlando Slanning Esquire had presented a dozen bottles of old port for the use of the aged at the Union Workhouse.

The local paper announced it, and Primrose instantly accosted her husband, who was in the room when she read the statement of his generosity.

"Whatever will you do next?" she asked, putting down the paper.

"My name there? I've not been doing anything, have I? Is it the run last week?"

"No—this port for the paupers—what nonsense!"

"I thought it rather a good idea, Prim—really."

"I dare say ; but whose idea was it? That's the point."

"My own—a sudden flash."

She looked doubtful.

"One would think you were going to run for Parliament, or something. Not that I mind an atom. I'm delighted you did it ; only why have kept it from me?"

"Not intentionally. I meant to have told you—really. But I clean forgot it."

"What did it cost?"

"Sixty bob—as a matter of fact it was invalid port—just the thing for those poor old boys."

"A ridiculous price! Don't do these wild deeds without telling me, Orlando. It's very noble; but it's also rather silly. They would all have liked some good humming 'October' very much better."

"Never again—solemn word," he said.

He was much relieved that the truth had not transpired; but once having dared to take a step without the knowledge of Primrose, he ventured others in various innocent directions, and secured a little fearful pleasure therefrom. Only one of these actions embraced the Wolferstans. It was presently known that Ilet had gone up to Exeter for an operation; and upon the occasion of visiting the city alone, Slanning called at the hospital and inquired concerning her progress. He left no name, but merely expressed satisfaction on being informed that she was making a good recovery.

CHAPTER X

AT 'SLANNING'S'

THE attitude of certain persons to Wolferstan was now clearly marked and for the most part understood.

Mr. Horn continued to ignore him ; but Mrs. Horn had long since forgiven the man and much regretted Ilet's misfortune, though she held that in some ways the affair was sadder for Primrose than the actual sufferer. Orlando for his part regretted these incidents, and even showed his regret ; only Primrose continued unchanged and had not bated one atom of her determinations. But for the time she was content to wait and watch awhile. She knew not the full extent of the physical mischief for which she was responsible ; yet even the fact that Ilet might bear no more, must have seemed small to her beside the greater matter of Wolferstan's demoralization. The wife's body was a lesser interest than the husband's soul. She wondered much concerning that and its development. She wished that an opportunity would offer for seeing him at close hand and studying the face she knew so well. It would tell her at a glance of progress—retrograde or the reverse.

Opportunity, however, did not offer, and for a considerable time no news of the Wolferstans reached her.

It was not until late spring that Ilet found herself strong again. Then came an evening when old Mr. Pierce declared that the patient was equal to life's full task once more, and announced her own intention to return to her cottage.

This, however, Wolferstan refused to permit.

"You don't leave us again," he said. "This thing have brought you into our hearts in a way that I could never have dreamed of. We couldn't get forward without you—and no more could the little girl."

"'Tis of her I'm thinking," said the old woman. "I know

full well when your eye lights on her what's behind it. I'm sorry to the soul for you that you can't have such another, owing to the will of God."

"Leave that. But don't fear. I love the child very well—almost as well as you do in a way, because you love it for its father and I love it for its mother. Ban't that reason, Abner?"

Mr. Barkell and his son had walked to see the Wolferstans this night; and they heard with great gladness that Ilet had recovered complete health again.

"Trust her," answered old Barkell. "Trust Henny Pierce to understand such a thing, though I speak to her face. Sorrow's like frost, Dodd. Some it kills outright and some it sweetens. Some soft souls it freezes, beyond our poor power to thaw; and some, built tougher, it do mellow into a large patience and trust in their Heavenly Father and a great power of sharing other folks' grief. So with Henny here: her troubles have made larger the heart that nearly broke under 'em. She hath the gift of comfort and she've paid for the gift with God. He knows how many tears."

"Must take Him all His holy time to count that money," said the younger Barkell. "If tears was working cash, you women might all be bankers."

"And so they be working cash—up-along; an' good interest paid," answered his father. "But 'tis a moment for laughter, not tears. Dash my old wig, I could dance to see you so peart and spry again, Ilet!"

"Nought matters now I've got her on her feet," declared Dodd. "These two women be always crying out about money; but what's money if we have no power of nature in us? How could I spend my stuff better than the way I have done?"

"I hope there'll be plenty of money presently, my dears," said old Barkell.

"We've got what's better—Ilet well again. Only this morning, too, there came an offer for pictures. It's going back a bit, for I thought I'd long done with small things like that; still, money's money, and I shall do the photographs."

"Quite right—do anything. Everybody's on your side," said Dicky. "We've all felt how hard it was and how tight money must have been; but trust you to put all right very quick, now you've got her back."

"The truth is," admitted Dodd, "that I've neglected my business a bit of late. You can't have your mind in two places at once, and it was never very far from Exeter while my woman stopped there. Now I've got to get going again and make up for lost time. I'm just as ambitious as ever I was, though Dick here may laugh to hear it. But I know where I want to get very well. This is only a set back, owing to these trials. We shall soon be up again now. What matters? What looks big and what looks difficult now that I've got her again? Nothing!"

These words he meant with all his heart, for love had grown mightily by what it fed on. Now, indeed, through passage of years, Ilet had become the first joy and pride of the man's life, and her happiness was at last actually his highest ambition. Many others he still cherished and secretly clung to, though without the old assurance and determination; but his wife came first. His love had waxed at sight of her sufferings, and he was more than ever devoted to her.

Her illness, however, proved very expensive, and money was scarce. Wolferstan had lost certain opportunities during the last few months, and now blamed himself sharply. But with the return of summer to the world and health to his wife, all prospects looked fairer, and he braced himself to face life. Already he had undertaken to do several small things involving commissions; but they were tasks that belonged to ten years before and represented a backward movement in prosperity. The outlook was considerably modified by recent circumstances, for there would be none now to hand on his name. But, while the fact diminished his happiness, it did not lessen his ambition. He had dwelt on this aspect of the future to Dicky Barkell, and been interested at the signalman's reply.

"A man with no relations?" said Dicky. "You're out there. Get high enough, and you'll find an heir very quick. Every rich man can get as many of 'em as he pleases. Give me a million of money to-morrow and I'll find a loving relation, called Barkell, for every ten thousand pound of it."

Elsewhere the name of Dodd had been thrown up again between other people, and it happened that Orlando's change of attitude was discovered by his wife.

The Slannings had given a summer party and the guests were gone. Together husband and wife strolled about their garden afterwards and discussed the entertainment. 'Slanning's' was an ancient abode, built on the foundations of one still more ancient. The mill stood removed from the dwelling-house by fifty yards, but a garden had been built and planted round about it. Along the edge of the mill-leaf flowers prospered, and the stream that drove the wheel, also worked a fountain which leapt from an old stone basin in a plot of grass. Borders of plants surrounded three sides of this enclosure, and along the fourth the mill-race went and the huge circumference of the wheel appeared. It was black and mossy and the music of the dripping water made a tinkling treble to the deeper and subdued thunder of the machinery within. Along the brink common blossoms prospered in a medley. Here opium poppies, red musk, irises, tall yellow money-worts, ferns and meadow-sweets made a pleasant bank, from behind which, in June twilights, Primrose sometimes threw a fly and caught a trout feeding at dusk.

Now she walked here beside her husband, and he smoked a cigarette and made fun of the various neighbours who had accepted their hospitality.

"Did you see the vicar? By Jove! He got away from his women-folk into a corner all by himself, and went for the strawberries and cream like a wolf! And old Adams drank three great tumblers of claret cup to his own cheek, then went over to Miss Minifie and began making risky jokes! Her face was a caution—like a dead fish trying to blush!"

Primrose smiled. She was well dressed in a costume that restrained and concealed the growing contours of her form. But years told lightly upon her face, and acquaintances secretly marvelled to see a blonde wear so well.

Presently her husband interested her.

"Thorpe was talking to me this afternoon about Dodd Wolferstan. It seems that he has been rather quiet—Wolferstan I mean—since his wife smashed up. And Thorpe is going to offer him a job."

"What sort of job?"

"He's heard a lot of Wolferstan's virtues from the parson at Okehampton, and a lot of his cleverness from other people, so he

means to kill two birds with one stone and give the chap a lift and do himself good too."

"Cattle, of course—a buying commission, I suppose. What did you say?"

"It wasn't any business of mine. I didn't say anything. Yes—I did: I said I was glad."

"Really?"

"I was glad. The wretched beggar—well—not to have any kids, you know—I—— This job in Derbyshire will put twenty or thirty pounds in his pocket."

"This is interesting. You'll say you're sorry for Wolferstan presently."

"It wouldn't be far short of the truth if I did."

"Come and sit down," she said, "and explain yourself. You've surprised me. Does Wolferstan know of this idea of Mr. Thorpe's?"

"Yes—it has been mentioned to him and he is keen about it."

They took a seat in the shade, and Primrose came to the point without a moment's delay.

"What do you mean by telling me this?" she asked. "It was reasonable to mention it; but you seem in two minds yourself."

"I don't think I am at all. I'll out with it: I want him to have the work. Surely he's hit hard enough, Prim. Can't you—I don't say forgive him, but forget him? Isn't it time now we—you understand?"

She stared in real astonishment, for her husband amazed her. It was the first time in his life that he had done so. This immense change of attitude he had managed to conceal until the present. Now he himself felt the significance of his revelation, and was half frightened, half defiant.

"Say all you've got to say," she answered, "then I'll speak to you, if I may. You've been doing a deal of hard thinking on your own account, dear."

"Not more than usual—but there it is: I'm sick of bullying this poor devil. It's not fair fighting—as a sportsman I speak. We've got the money and brains and power, and everything. He's got nothing but an invalid wife. I can speak to you, of course: it's silly to mince words about it. You did worse

than even you hoped to do when you knocked her out of time last winter."

"Yes?"

"I hate you when you sit so damned quiet. If you're angry with me, be angry. Don't look like something waiting to jump. You see, Primrose, I'm getting on—not a boy any more, worse luck. And one can't live in the world and have hard knocks and disappointments and be the same. It's no good, my not saying I'm sorry for the man, because I am. Can't you see what I mean? We feel kind even to a fox who has given us a real good run, and don't mind if he beats us at the finish. Well—it's like that. Can't you call 'em off now? You've had your fun surely? He's showed sport too."

"Is that quite all?"

"Yes, it is. I say I'm glad he's going to have this work. Live and let live's a very good motto. You may push this too far: a worm will turn."

"Quite all?"

"Yes—except that I'm not going on with it—not a day more. I'm a big man in this place and I don't want things to come out that would make me look a small one. Nobody's got one word against me, and nobody ever shall have. I can't stand this persecution any more, and I hope you feel the same. There is such a thing as religion, though the better class of people laugh at it. Anyway, when a man gets on, he begins to take life seriously, and I think we've been wrong, and I'm going to chuck it."

"I quite see, dear Orlando. I'm sure you mean most sensibly, and I know this man can't look the same from your point of view as he does from mine. I allow for that. I grant more: you've got to thank him for me—haven't you?"

"In a sort of way, yes."

"Then see how reasonable I am. You're always worth listening to, and your opinions are usually followed—by men especially, and by me always. But in this matter there's another side. As you say, we must live and let live. But there's another motto. A bargain's a bargain. A very clear and definite understanding went to our marriage—didn't it, dear?"

"If it did?"

"You want to be honourable and upright and all that. So you

are always—everybody knows it. But honour begins at home, don't you think? You must try and bring back the past a little clearer to your memory."

"It's devilish to keep the past so jolly clear as you do."

"Not devilish in me—merely characteristic. It cuts both ways, a good memory."

"People will begin to see it. There's the practical side, as well as the moral. He knows what we're up to well enough by this time. Suppose he begins to talk of it and tell others, and explain to them how every bit of his bad luck one way and another can be traced back to you—to us? I can't be pointed at as a man who is hounding another man to misery."

"That rests entirely with you. If Wolferstan made any such ridiculous statement, it would only be laughed at as a brain-sick fancy. Not one stroke could be brought home to you—or to me. What did I marry you for, Orlando? Answer that question and you'll see you are saying these things too late."

"But the end of it? You're not going on for ever surely?"

"You won't answer my question, dear."

"I grant when you agreed to marry me that I promised with my whole heart to help you punish the beggar; and I've kept the promise. We've made him smart; we've driven it home. But we can't go on for ever."

"There was no limitation. It will go on for ever."

"Is it good enough?"

"The good of it has nothing to do with the matter. You married me with your eyes open. I might really be angry with you, Orlando. Some people faced with this would be quite furious. To be disloyal is worse than to be unfaithful in the eyes of many women. But I know you too well to be angry, and admire you far too much. Shall I tell you how this has come about?"

"It's conscience, I reckon."

"No, it isn't. It's because you play such a big game and have such a number of irons in the fire, that you can't keep everything in your mind at once. Even your memory isn't made of iron. You undertake such a tremendous deal of work, and you are so prominent here, that there simply isn't time for you to remember everything. But you mustn't be cross if I remind you now and then. This looks small to your masculine intelligence.

But wait a minute and glance back. Think how you swore at that gallant tramp who kissed his hand to me last week. Well, this tramp kissed my face—touched me—put his arms round me, pretended he was going to marry me. Remember that. Remember that once your wife was an innocent girl, and that a certain man played with her, fooled her, insulted her. Does time alter that or make it smaller? It was yesterday! The beggar on the road meant a compliment in his coarse way; Wolferstan—what did he mean? What did he do? Had he outraged me, I couldn't have suffered worse than I have suffered. He did outrage me, for that matter. If you'd been there, you'd have killed him. Poisoned my life, deflowered my virgin lips—for what? To laugh at me for ever! Don't say you forgive it, Orlando, because I know right well you cannot. You love me too dearly for that. Nothing was ever too great for you to do for me; nothing was ever too small. That's love in the grand style. And hate in the grand style's the same. Nothing's too big, nothing's too little."

"Don't think I forgive anybody living who ever did you a wrong."

"You couldn't, Orlando. And why should you expect me to do so? Is it the least of this man's faults that he despised you, sneered at you, dared to laugh at you in his vanity and ignorance?"

"I believe the wretched fellow actually did—once; but not now, I fancy."

"Not openly, no doubt. Because the countryside wouldn't stand it. But 'wolves do change their hair, not their hearts'. He's the same man still. You think he's learnt the lesson you've taught him. I know better. Behind your back he still laughs at you and boasts of what he did to me."

"If I thought that——"

"You don't think it; you're too large-hearted and generous to think it. You judge others by yourself and cannot imagine people doing wicked, underhand things, because you couldn't do them. But trust a wronged woman to read character. If he had the power, he'd make us a laughing-stock to-morrow."

Orlando considered.

"He certainly said 'poor Slanning'. But ages ago."

"And how often has he said it since? Do you trust a snake? Then why trust him? Do you pity a cat shot for poaching?"

Then why pity him? His place is under your feet. He wronged you when he wronged me. He—I hate to think you can be on his side against me, Orlando. It has grieved me and made me feel old and wretched. If I thought—if I thought you were beginning not to love me——”

She broke off and felt for her handkerchief. He swore and thundered, and damned Wolferstan by ail his gods.

“Not to love you—you, who are my life! The dust is the place for him. Let him get there—the quicker the better. The man who could bring a tear to your cheek! Good God Almighty! He deserves worse—a million times worse than he's got—a million times worse!”

“I don't ask you to do anything at all,” she said. “Far from that. Go your way and let him go his. Your way and his are as different as light from darkness. Let him alone. The seeds of failure are in him, but we did not sow them, and it is not our place to weed them out.”

“You've opened my eyes a bit. When people can drag tears out of you, by God, it's time I did something.”

“There are not many men who love their wives in the way that you do.”

“I'll ask Thorpe to think twice, anyway, and not send Wolferstan to Derbyshire.”

Primrose considered.

“I know a better plan. You've never killed a trout in the Derwent. Why not do so? A month on the Peak—instead of Wales. We've often thought of it.”

“By Gad, what a mind you've got! Lightning's a fool to it. You mean that if we were going up, Thorpe would come himself?”

“No, I didn't mean that. But if we were going, he'd very likely ask you to look at the cattle for him. Your judgment is as good as Wolferstan's and a thousand times better.”

“No, no, I don't say that. The man knows his business.”

“So does Mr. Thorpe. At any rate if we go to Derbyshire——”

“He'd come. If you gave him half a ghost of a hint you'd like him to, of course he would. He's such a pal of yours.”

“He's a sensible young fellow, and he cultivates us for your wisdom, not my good looks.”

"Of course if he went north with us, he wouldn't want Wolferstan to go?"

"Naturally."

A servant came to tell Orlando that somebody wished to speak with him, and he returned to the house.

Primrose strolled a little further, then sat down by the mill-race and watched a trout feeding.

She smiled slightly to herself, as one smiles who has conquered a child.

CHAPTER XI

THE SILENT PLACES

THE young man Thorpe, mentioned by Orlando, was an admirer of Primrose. When he heard that the Slannings were going into Derbyshire and rather hoped to meet him there, the thing that Primrose desired fell out. Thorpe decided to see the stock in question himself, and combine business with pleasure. The necessity of employing Wolferstan ceased to exist, and he wrote and said as much.

Dodd was keenly disappointed, and anon, when he learnt that the Slannings were also in Derbyshire, his life stood still. For two whole days he desisted from work and took himself up to the silent places of the Moor that he might weigh the force of this new circumstance. The commission, had he purchased, must have brought him some little profit. It was a small thing, yet, rather than he should have it, Primrose Slanning had gone for a week into Derbyshire and so tempted Thorpe to change all his plans and accompany her north. Thus he read the matter, and with such force did he point his conclusion, that he nearly convinced his wife against her will.

"None not blind could miss this," he said, "and it proves what I've long known and what you've long refused to know. Nothing's too small for her now. She'd take the bread out of our mouths if she could, and see us starve. She'll do so yet if she can."

"If you are so positive of it, why go on like this then? She's only a woman, after all. There must be some way of getting at her."

He shook his head.

"No, there isn't. And, if there was, I wouldn't take it. I'm stronger than she is. The luck's been on her side—that's all. It will turn again. A day of reckoning must come."

"Let's have a long tell about it to-morrow," she said. "I'm

going up on the Moor to pick hurts for a tart Sunday, and you can take the pictures you promised to do. Do'e go along with me. We'll have a quiet time all alone, and look all round this and think solemn and serious about it. I begin to see you must be right. We can't go on slipping downhill, dear Dodd. If she's so evil and so strong, we must see to it and protect ourselves against her."

"Yes, or hit back. You look surprised, Ilet; but it may have to come to that. I'm not a sheep, but a man, and not a particular weak man neither. This can't go on. Christ 'Himself had to strike once or twice. 'Tis no Christian part to forget you're a man. I'm not going to be galled and galled into my grave by that devil. But I'd sooner hear you speak about it than anybody, now I've convinced your mind that what I've seen so long is true. You thought me uncharitable and quick to think evil. You even stuck up for her on the bed of sickness where she put you; but you can't any more after this. She's shown her game clear enough now, so 'tis for us to play a card for a change."

The next day opened fair on the confines of another autumn. The hours shone graciously, and husband and wife moved with some afterglow of old-time happiness together along the waste. The topic they had gone out to discuss was evaded from hour to hour; Ilet picked her berries; Wolferstan loafed beside her, smoked many pipes of tobacco, and then, when the light was kindly and the sun had turned into the West, set up his camera and took certain views in the neighbourhood of High Willhayes.

They had drifted half a mile apart, and Ilet, busy at her work, only stopped when a big basket was nearly full. Then she turned with keen eyes, marked the trident of his camera standing far distant, and trudged back to it. The thing reared solitary and the velvet cloth had been blown off it. She picked this up and looked round for Dodd; but it was some time before she found him. Then a brown leather case attracted her attention, and she remembered it as that which he carried beside Oke, when he met her on Black Tor Copse, and again asked her to marry him. For a while she reflected upon those moments, and considered how much more they must have meant to her husband than to herself. He had told her everything concerning that day, and how he was actually going to offer marriage to another woman, when he met her and found his purpose crumble before her.

She turned, looked hither and thither, then suddenly found Dodd. He had set up his camera and waited for the sun to go round somewhat ; then he had sunk into drowsiness and so to sound sleep. Now his pipe was upon the turf beside him and he reposed with his face lifted to the light. But the time was far past for his picture. The hour turned towards evening, and the wilderness assumed familiar phases under the sinking light of the sun. It made the barren planes to glow ; it touched the marsh and fen and featureless, blind streaks of stagnant water ; it warmed the ash-grey of the tors into brightness : it touched the heather to a note of flame. Golden exhalations flooded the Moor, and something of the red sun's self seemed kneaded into the texture and composition of the earth. The evening light deepened into sheer splendour and burnt over this desolation. Cloud shadows sailed along the waste no more, but fell upon each other in heaven ; and instead, the great earth shadows stretched easterly into the valleys and spread between them carpets of tender darkness fringed with the sunset fires. Light passed gently and peacefully away, as rare music that sinks into silence ; the after-glow waxed and faded ; detail died and a wave of monochrome flowed gently over all things. Yet darkness spread reluctantly and the smile of the hour was followed by no frown. The Moor enjoyed that perfect and rare experience of absolute peace succeeding upon set of sun—a peace unvexed by one sigh of the wind, unshaken by the least elemental sound. Great aerial purity followed day. From orange to golden green the wide west waned by imperceptible gradation ; and only one thread of scarlet cloud stretched under the evening star where, hanging low above the nether gloom, white Venus throbbed in glory.

It did not immediately awaken her husband. It was long since she had seen his sleeping face by daylight, and now, ere the light waned, she had full leisure to note it curiously. She sat down beside him and marked how the searching, low illumination showed a sort of secret writing there that she had not read before. His open eyes and the vivacity of his look and play of facial life, had concealed this script until now ; but here, while he slumbered under the sky and no thought or action of mind held muscles together or woke expression, like an outline of reality, rather than reality itself, his unconscious features lay. She saw things set starkly forth, as a map displays the world, innocent of the mists

and clouds, light and darkness, that mark a living land ; because the mists and clouds of thought, the light and darkness of perception and consciousness, were for a while banished from his countenance.

She looked, and her eyes dimmed as she saw, so that Ilet had to brush them ere she could go on seeing. Here were the changes brought of battle—the dents and stabs of time, who suffers no year to pass unrecorded, no sigh to lift the breast, without a visible sign. Every sorrow, every anxiety, every frustrated hope, every error paid for, or owed for, was marked there for the eye of love to mourn. She remembered his face so different only ten short years earlier. She recalled the frankness of his look, the courtesy and tact of his ways, the eagerness to please and swiftness to win friendship. The expression that went with those qualities was changed ; the traits themselves were less marked. Care had blunted his amiability and lessened his anxiety to bring pleasure to other people ; anger had wasted his vital energies somewhat ; unavailing outbursts, though rare enough, yet aged him when they came and left their mark within and without.

In his sleep he moved and shook his head and said ‘No’ to some dream suppliant. It was the typical word that had taken the place of ‘Yes’. Aforetime he had prospered by concessions ; now he strove to succeed with an unyielding attitude, that hardened like a crust over his larger, younger nature. His life was a little soured and his patience a little weakened.

The sun set on the world, and Ilet, lifting her eyes, marked it vanish, then turned to her husband’s face again. Had the sun set there also ? She asked herself the question not without sorrow. The sun of heaven would again rise here to glitter on miles of silver dew, to thread gems into the web and to light the torches of the morning upon each crown of eastern-facing granite ; but would the sun of this man’s soul ever more burst through the shadows that encompassed him and turn his night into dawn ? That she could ask questions so dark and dreadful startled her. She shook herself free of foreboding and lifted up her heart a little. Lasting sorrow, indeed, was his, and irreparable loss ; he should have no child by her, he should not hand on the name he bore ; but there were worse things that might easily be escaped. They had each other. She knew that she was

more to him than any child ; she believed that she was dearer to him than all ambition.

She looked at him again and saw the furrows that were familiar and the furrows that were new. The old ones had deepened ; the new ones played in gentler reticulations at the corners of his shut eyes and between his eyebrows. He was going a little bald, and that insignificant circumstance troubled him sometimes more than the nakedness bred from the heart, that appeared in his speech, method of thought and view of other men.

He awoke and found her in tears.

"My dear woman, what's a miss?" he cried.

She sat by him and he put his arms round her.

"Only my foolishness—looking at you asleep and—and——"

"Thinking—I know——" The waking animation of his features grew a little dim, and he yawned drearily.

"Hang it all!—the time for that last picture has gone past. I've been asleep for two hours; and you've been looking at me and thinking how jolly old and ugly I get—eh?"

"Not that, Dodd—only that you're more careworn like—naturally. I expect you often think the same of me."

"Never. You don't change. But me—I've marked it when shaving many a time—the outward sign of the inward—God knows what. Oh, Ilet, it's bad, it's bad to feel yourself growing older and not forwarder. I don't mean only in worldly things, but inner things. I've stuck every way."

"Don't say it. 'Tis far from true. You've had a cruel deal to try you of late years—more'n your share ; an' you've come through as few men would have. You've never been shook by it ; you've always risen up to your true self after——"

"After falling below it, and snarling and snapping, and losing my temper, and talking a world of wicked trash. No, I'm not the same man I was ten years ago. I wish I was. I was larger-minded, gentler, less selfish then. And hopefuller. Life's the bane of hope. And 'tis an awful thing, Ilet, to get less patient as you grow older, instead of more patient. 'Tis contrary even to nature and the way of the poor dumb beasts. There's some dreadful cause when that happens to a man. It's happened to me though ; and all the work of one evil, plotting woman. I used to say that nought could hurt a man from outside ; I used to think nought could rob me of what matters, or take my self-

control away. I'm wiser now. 'Tis the life-long battle that's making me old. 'Tis fighting that damned she, and knowing I'll have to fight her till one of us goes under."

"Don't dream such things, dear Dodd."

"I wish it was a dream. I laughed at it when first I found it out—ages back, after she beat my horse and took that cup. I saw it then, but I never thought 'twas more than a flash of sheet lightning. 'Tis very different now. It frets and tears and burrows now. It makes me terrible hard to other people, where once I'd have been soft; it poisons my trust in man. When I was young, nothing ever angered me, but the sight of my own sins when I knelt afore God. I had a large gift of making allowance for other folk then. But now—I've grown so touchy as a rat in a trap. I feel it myself; I think every man I meet is trying to best me. I see more than honesty in the plainest bargain. The world's wearing out my staying power, Ilet—at least not the world, but her."

"Never! To feel these things is half way to curing 'em. But you make too much of it, Dodd. You are yourself for all you say—not another person. We've been under the weather of late—a bit of a shadow like."

"Who throwed the shadow? Look at all the cleverness of it. Nothing to lay hold of—nothing to hold up to the shame of other people. She's wove all this—all; and she'll go on doing it, unless we cut the power to do worse. It's not the actual things she's done against us, but the power of the things to work on and on—like poison in water. I leap to anger, now, same as another man leaps to drink. The prick that used to heal in a moment, festers now. I'm not the man I was, Ilet."

"But you shall be. You can get back to it easy enough—by the old way that you've trod so steady. You taught me to feel it and make it the first thing in my life, Dodd. And be you, who made a Christian of me, going to be less yourself? Well I know you're not! You said we should have a talk, and so we have done; but, if you'd thought a minute, you'd have remembered 'twasn't for us to talk, but listen."

"I know what you mean. It's very right and proper. Yet sometimes our ears strain for the Voice so long, that they get weary of waiting."

"'Tis two Sundays since you went to church."

"More shame to me. But only once since I missed out of wrong-doing. I ought to have gone, but somehow I felt I couldn't. I went 'pon the Moor, and sat and listened for the small voice, Ilet; an' it didn't speak."

"'Twas a sorrow to me and a surprise to many that you kept away."

"I'll not miss again. All you say is true. How do we dare to plan and plot and say we'll do this and that? Listening is what we've got to do—listening on our knees. You've taught me right and lifted me up, as you always do."

"And I'll ax God with all my might too, dear Dodd. After all, 'tis such an easy thing to trust Him."

"It always have been till late days."

"And always must be. Don't let nought come between you and prayer, dear Dodd. That's the identical word you've often said to me. The power of it is above any human cleverness. Us won't plot; us will pray, an' let God A'mighty plot for us—shall we, Dodd?"

He took her hands, very purple with the berries, and pressed them tightly.

"What a wife!" he said. "And I grumble, and doubt, and take thought, and don't see that here, alongside me, part of myself, is a better, blessedder thing than any the world can give or rob me of."

"We've got ourselves, Dodd. We've got each other. Even she can't alter that."

"By God! but she nearly did! If she had—if—'twould have been her life for yours, as sure as the sun's gone down. I'd not have let her live after."

"Don't—don't say such madness! We've got such a deal to be thankful for, and such a God to trust."

He rose and packed his tools.

"We came up here to good purpose," he said. "No, no! I can carry the case, and your basket too. Good things have happened to me to-day—thanks to you. I've missed the most precious balm of all, while my mind roamed, like a fool's mind, and I cast about for an answer. There's only One can answer. I'll ask Him, Ilet; and I'll beg Him humble to forgive me for not asking Him before. 'Tis like the sight of water to the thirsty to remember. But how low I've sunk to have lost sight of this for a

moment. 'Tis a great blessing for you to have said these things to me. You'll get your reward some day, Ilet."

"My reward's here this minute—in your dear face," she said.

Her heart was actually happy, and his full of new peace as they went down together.

CHAPTER XII

FLIGHT OF TIME

A VERY real awakening followed upon Wolferstan's Dartmoor day. Faith warmed him ; patience touched his heart ; the speech of Ilet fortified him greatly and made him look back with astonishment at his own recent lapses of temper and of trust in his superhuman guides.

Religion, neglected a little of late, refreshed him more than ever, and he became very zealous in public observance and private prayer. He blessed his wife for these things ; pursued the right strongly ; and waited and watched to see Heaven do its part.

But his nerve was not as of old. He approached the threshold of middle age, and the patience, that belonged intrinsically to his first manhood, now became a virtue only achieved with effort. Months would pass without any display of weakness ; then circumstances and anxieties combined to fret him into explosion, and the ebullition was only less dreadful to his little household than the depression and misery that followed upon it.

Three months passed by and winter held the land again.

Then tribulation of a minor sort made Dodd lose his temper. In this state he climbed from Okehampton to his home and found little Henny at mischief in the garden ; whereupon his irritation gained vent ; he beat the child sharply and she ran, screaming with pain and fright, to her grandmother. Ilet was out, and the old woman chid the man from her heart.

"I do hate an uneven soul," she said. "Be harsh or easy ; be short or smooth ; but, for God's love, Dodd Wolferstan, don't blow hot to-day an' cold to-morrow, like you be taking to now. Us never can wager whether you'll wear a smile or a frown when you get home to dinner. You let the ups an' downs all come out so cruel, till we feel like a lot o' dogs with a bad master, an'

can't be easy till we know your frame of mind. You'm never the same a week. Look at that poor, frightened maid. You've seed her messing about in the garden a hundred times and said nought, or perhaps laughed at her and joined the fun; then—just because you'm niffed about something—you lift your hand to her to let out your bile. Ban't Christian, and very well you know it."

"I won't have the place like a pigsty; and I won't have the fowls running in the front garden. I've said it till I'm tired of saying it."

"Then mend the wire fence and save your wind. That's your work—not ours. You'm unreasonable to blame us for what we can't help."

He growled and went up to his room; but before little Henny's eyes were dry, he had returned and taken her on his lap and kissed her.

"I was wrong," he said; "I mostly am wrong nowadays. Forgive me, baby, an' I'll get a new trumpet for you this very minute."

Henny forgave him and her grandmother smiled.

"There you are! You'd trapse down in the town again an' wear yourself out—for nought but to make peace with your own silly heart. You mend that fence, afore dinner. That's good sense, that is. Plenty of time for a toy next time business takes you downhill."

"I've promised," answered Wolferstan, and he rose and walked down to the shops.

Ilet returned before he did and heard the story.

"'Tis things like that that hurt," she said. "'Tisn't the temper one minds so much as—as the feebleness, if you understand me. Strong men often rage, like the sky thunders, and the air's cleared by it; but our dear man—what was the sense of whipping baby an' then going off to get a toy for her? 'Tis the feebleness. He'd not have done one nor t'other a few year ago."

"If us could stiffen him a bit, 'twould be a very good thing, I grant you," said the old woman. "Not but what he can be hard enough when he pleases. He ban't a tyrant, like some I've known—a brute at home and mild as Moses outside; but there 'tis; he sets up his back at the wrong time and for nought."

Dodd's wife assented, and within a fortnight of that event another aspect of the man's character appeared, for he met with real ill-fortune and bore it in a spirit of patient bravery that made Ilet's heart beat with pride. His cattle were now off the Moor, and some ten valuable pedigree heifers he kept near him. The rest were sent down into the low lands until spring should come; but these young cattle he stalled near his house in a long, tarpitched byre snugly situated at a hollow of the hill half a mile from his house. On a night when Dodd was from home, this place caught fire, and not a beast escaped. The deed was deliberately done, and the incendiary gave himself up three days afterwards. He was a carpenter, out of work, to whom Ilet had refused food. It transpired that in the past this rogue had worked for Wolferstan, and, indeed, helped to build the byre when first he came to Okehampton. Drunk and in a rage, he destroyed the place and the cattle; then, a week afterwards, confessed, and presently got five years' penal servitude for the crime.

This most serious reverse, instead of casting down the man, found him at his best. He explained his attitude to Ilet.

"For a minute I was struck down when I heard it," he said. "I felt like Job, and the Devil was at my elbow, if ever he stood there, and urged me to curse God. But that was only the horror of feeling she'd struck again. Yes, at first I firmly believed that she was behind this, and had worked me evil by another hand. Then, when I found 'twasn't her, I felt a load off me. Even the terrible loss and the anxious time ahead, look small compared to what they would have looked. I could face life with a light heart almost—I could even begin again, I do think, if that woman changed—or died——"

"Let it go out of your mind. She've done her worst. She can't shake you from God."

"No—that's beyond human power, Ilet. In my sober moments I know how deep the roots lie. The storm strains them—more shame to me—but they'll hold; never doubt that. This evil's sent for His purposes. I feel the whip—I turn the other cheek to the Everlasting Smiter. What comes from Him is right."

But the death of his stock altered Wolferstan's hopes for the coming year. It grew necessary to retrench, and his first thought was to sell his best horse whereon he hunted. Ilet held

out against this, and, since she begged so earnestly, he kept it for the season.

She was thankful to see him ride out on a hunting morning; but she did not know that upon these occasions he seldom went to meet. Instead, he took his own course over the winter loneliness of the Moor, passed through the empty antres of the land, roamed far beyond reach of man and his dwelling-places. These hidden hours served their purpose, fortified his soul, and tuned him to a better spirit than any occasions of sport.

He kept more aloof from his kind than of old; his acquaintance marked it, and set different interpretations upon it. Some held that he was growing proud; others, better informed, declared that the man approached a crisis of his fortunes and might, ere long, be seen on a valuable horse no more. Once Wolferstan overheard some remarks of this sort where sportsmen waited while hounds drew cover, and the hint and whistle that went with it, poisoned his day. He became suspicious, self-conscious, quick to fancy himself the subject of discourse. If two men met near him and lifted their voices in laughter, he grew uneasy. His judgment lost a little of its charity, and, while increasing knowledge of the world poured in from without, the personal factor of unrest made it impossible for his mind to digest this food of experience, or profit by it. He found himself thinking evil, and the discovery brought grief and contrition to him. He started the inner life again in a larger spirit, struggled to take charitable views of all men, to seek motives before censuring actions, to thrust the snake of suspicion from his mind. A period of peace returned to him and life looked a little brighter.

On an occasion of hunting he met with Slanning, and since Primrose was not out, the miller manoeuvred to get alongside Wolferstan and fall into conversation. He meant no unfriendliness, but was as usual maladroit in his choice of words.

"Damned sorry about those young things," said Orlando. "It's horrid to think how they suffered—fried to death in that byre. We oughtn't to use so much wood in our byres. They're regular death-traps."

"Stone ones cost a bit of money," said Dodd. "All the same, you're right."

"Somebody told me that two dozen were burnt, and all pedigree stuff."

"Ten was the number."

"What a born devil that man must have been! And just because you wouldn't give him a drink of cider—eh?"

"Not at all. You've got the story wrong, like everybody else, out of the newspaper. He'd worked for me before he went to the bad. He came begging, as he had done for about six weeks, and I'd told my wife she wasn't to give him another crust. He was drunk and cursed her. Presently he cleared off, and she saw no more of him. Then he burnt my place down and, three days after, went to one of those revival meetings and confessed."

"You don't seem to have any luck with your cattle."

"Perhaps not; but that won't break your heart."

"No—it's nothing to me personally; but I'm merely a little surprised, because, when you were younger, old Horn, my father-in-law, always thought you were going to be a big man some day."

Wolferstan laughed.

"What does he call a big man, I wonder? A man that never forgets and never forgives? A man that goes his way, like a steam-roller, and has no heart or charity for other people? Is that what he admires? I suppose it must be, since that's the man he is himself."

Slanning flushed. "What's changed you so much?" he said.

"I'm not changed. 'Tis others that change. I go my way. 'Tis Alexander Horn that changed and cold-shouldered me at the critical stage of my career."

"For pretty good reasons. However, that's delicate ground. We've both got memories. You oughtn't to have bought those things at Marhamchurch."

"I know it. Didn't I regret it, and write humbly to the man, and offer to give them up at the figure of your last bid? Didn't I say in my letter that I'd lost my temper and was sorry for it? Who on God's earth could do more? And he never answered the letter."

"I know—I was sorry he didn't meet you—really."

"You! Forgive my saying it, but, between father and daughter, you're rather like a feather in a gale of wind. I don't blame you for your part. You've only done what you were told—and will again, I dare say. But——"

"Stop that! You're an impossible man, Wolferstan, and you're a fool too—which you weren't once. Why, even I—but there, it's no good talking to you.' Life teaches you nothing apparently. To say such things to me, after what I've done for you. But you weren't worth it—such a churl—and I'm sorry I ever cared a damn about you. Horn was right; you're no good."

This attack, the result of his own speech, did not trouble Wolferstan. He was angry himself—being turned to anger by his own thoughts—and now he felt glad to see the other grow hot. He did not desire Orlando's friendship and he did not much believe in it. Having once entertained a contempt for the man, he found it difficult, if not impossible, to take him seriously. He was glad of the opportunity to say things which might go back to his old master's ear, and, having said them, he turned his back on Slanning without answering the latter's assault. He was conscious that he had now broken with the miller for ever, and did not consider that for this flamboyant and conceited soul, life had also brought its lessons and chastening influences.

With advance of spring and necessity for large payments, Dodd found that he had to call on capital, and it was then, when he grew anxious, that Ilet worked her way and he reluctantly consented to let a part of his house for lodgings. He had long withstood her reasonable petition in this matter, but now yielded. There was no difficulty, for with the opening of the artillery camp above them, and the visits of successive batteries from all parts of England, demand for accommodation began and lasted until the end of the practice in September.

Thus it came about that soldiers, sometimes alone and sometimes with their wives and families, occupied the two front apartments and certain bedrooms in Dodd Wolferstan's house. He chafed under it, and the glimpse of a social order other than his own first interested him, finally annoyed him. The soldiers were usually gentlemen, and some took interest in their landlord and his pursuits; but the gap between them depressed Dodd, and the possibility of ever crossing it seemed remote. Ambition had starved while anxiety was afoot; now, in the atmosphere of these men, it revived a little. He surveyed the past years and found that he had made no progress of that sort. Therefore he affected a new outlook and pretended to despise the thing he

envied. Once he was off-hand and familiar with some of his younger lodgers, and, as a result, they ignored him during the remainder of their sojourn ;^{*} once he returned into the wiser way of his youth, and made a friend by so doing.

A soldier bought his horse from him 'or fifty pounds, and the fact saddened Ilet not a little, for she knew that he would hunt no more. But he promised to take pleasure and recreation in other ways. •

"Hunting was never the same after that awful bad time in the past," he said, when she regretted his action. "Somehow I always live again in that day and through that cursed home-coming to you, when I see hounds. And it wakes the devil in me too. I'm better out of it."

He hunted no more, and when he had sold the stock that he had raised, he found himself not justified in purchasing again. For a time he stood irresolute and revolved many schemes of action. He was solvent with money saved ; but now he doubted much how best for the future to apply time, energy and knowledge. Many courses presented themselves, and decision was difficult.

At this stage fell Wolferstan's fortieth birthday, and a few friends came to supper that they might celebrate it.

Some bore little gifts with them. Ilet gave him a woollen waistcoat of her own knitting, Mrs. Pierce produced a new prayer-book, and Dicky Barkell, a new knife. Abner also brought a gift. It was a volume of sermons that he had possessed for fifty years.

John and Thomas Ball joined the party, but carried no presents. After supper all talked of the future and advanced ideas. Only the younger Barkell said little.

Dodd, despite the joyful occasion, was moody and preoccupied. He fretted under their friendly advice ; he had not asked for it or sought it ; but Abner Barkell and Johnny Ball teemed with ideas. The ancient's were sensible ; the younger man's were based on piety and high aspirations. He was full of earnest and devout opinions ; and he looked at life in a spirit of trustfulness and hope. Dodd chafed at the round-eyed youth's somewhat unctuous sentiments, and turned impatiently from him. He desired to hear Dicky ; but Dicky was entirely occupied with his pipe.

At last Wolferstan found the tension more than he could bear and rose from his place.

"I'll ask you to come out with me in the yard a minute, Richard," he said. "I want to speak a private word to you, if you please."

The signalman nodded, and they went out together. Then Dicky sat on a granite trough in the moonlight and the other walked up and down in front of him and detailed his griefs.

"You was the only one that could keep your mouth shut, and I thank you for it," he began.

"'Twas better fun listening than talking. My old man's twittering do always amuse me: he's got such a lot of sense. As for that psalm-smiting house-painter—you used to talk like that once. But you don't now."

"The world's a hard place."

"So 'tis—if you try to do man's work in it."

"I shall be the wrong side of forty to-morrow morning, and nothing done."

"You know best about what's done. I should have thought there was too much done for your peace of mind. As to being wrong side of forty, as a Christian you oughtn't to say so. 'Tis for chaps like me, who don't believe in anything after, and don't want to—'tis for us to talk about the wrong side o' forty—not you. With your eternal home coming nearer every hour, you'm on the right side of forty surely? But you'm like the rest. 'Tis all a pretence, and whenever you speak from the heart, out comes truth."

"'Tis only a figure of speech. I ban't feared of death and shan't mind how soon it comes. My life's run into a very different pattern to what I planned, Dick. You've always got a dose of lemon for every complaint, but you can't say no bitterer thing to me than what I say to myself. I'm forty; and I've failed."

"You know best."

"Failed through no fault of mine—let the Lord witness to that. She's ruined me, Dick—I can see it clearer every day. I wouldn't say it to any living soul but you. But 'tis the truth. We see so clear looking back. She's done for me."

"Trash!" answered the other drily. "If you're ruined—and I won't believe that—'twasn't Primrose Slanning done it. That's

the old, cowardly whine of Adam and all his knock-kneed sort. No woman ever ruined a man unless the man had a weak spot for her poison to come in at. Men ruin themselves—women can't ruin 'em. Men ruin themselves by letting lust run away with 'em; men ruin themselves by believing lies; by trusting; by being weak; by bad qualities; by good qualities; by a thousand different ways; but the ruination comes from inside 'em. Every man's got a ruined corner to him somewhere—you and me and all. The dose you've had wasn't mixed by any hand but your own, Dodd Wolferstan. Think deep enough and you'll know it."

"That's not true."

"Your own act made her an everlasting enemy, as I knew it would. From the day you escaped marrying her, she was your foe. 'Twas only a question then which would be strongest. If you're ruined, 'tis because you was weaker than her; and that's only to say again your own weakness ruined you. She's had fine sport with you—from her point of view."

"You argue without God, as usual."

"Where does He come in? Show me His hand in the job, and I'll go on my knees in this mud. I say that the worst woman as ever walked is powerless to ruin a man, unless his nature's the right soil for her seed to grow in. If there's no starting-place for another person's evil to root in you, it won't grow, and there's an end of it."

"To shake a man's trust in God—think of that."

"And what is the trust worth that can be shaken? If 'twas capable of being shook, 'tis certain the power to shake would come along in some shape."

"Such a woman is stronger than the Devil. He would never have shook it. You would never have shook it. When my things were burnt, I sank down—down, till I found 'twasn't her work. Then I rose up again, because I said 'Tis God's work and therefore good'. I could bear that stroke; yet, when I see her power and know it can only come from her Maker, my heart sinks about my God."

Barkell was interested at this confession.

"You're built so," he answered. "You can't help it. Along with your mighty faith, there's a pinch of doubt. Like all your sort, you keep a profit and loss account with God. You think you don't; but you do. I'm just the other way. With all

my doubt, there's a pinch of faith—not in no God, but in the hopeful outlook of man's nature and the closer grasp he gets on wisdom and knowledge every generation."

"Any sort of hopefulness is good. I trusted in man too—once. See where it's taking me."

"All the same," said Dicky, "you are living and feeling. Your nature has took you into deep water and, sink or swim, you've had a splash for your forty years. You've lived. You've done man's work. But as for me, I'm a worse ruin than you, for all my talk. You've been knocked about with shot and shell. That's grand, even though you come out second best. I'm going down with dry rot. I'm a coward for all my magpie chatter. I'm a coward—sitting there behind my points—doing what any fool could do. My life's wasted. But it's fulfilled the result of the ingredients. 'Twas mixed so. I shall go on rusting out; you'll go on wearing out. We can't change."

"And what will that woman go on doing?"

"She'll go on hunting you as long as you let her, like a boy hunts a squirrel, or a man a hare, till it drops or escapes."

"I can't stand no more of it. I shall hit back."

"You'll do what's in you to do. You'll be yourself."

"The thing is to know my next step—speaking generally. Sometimes I'm in a mind to go right away; sometimes I almost resolve to face her and have it out. Can't say that I'm doing much here for the moment."

"To face her would be a very interesting deed. You heard about Joe Chastey, the Portreeve?"

"Only that he'd come into a bit of money when his uncle at Launceston died."

"Yes; but he's going to take over the business there, instead of selling it. 'Tis a corn chandler's, and he understands a bit about it. He may go."

"What's that to me?"

"I don't know. How would you like to go back?"

"Go back ten years and be Portreeve again?"

"Why not? The first step to going forward is often going back. Better men than you, or me, have made mistakes that took ten years to put right."

They returned to the house and found others studying the same proposition.

Het was nervous that her husband would be angry at the suggestion of a return to Bridgetstowe ; but, to her surprise, he took it quietly and even amiably. To go back to the home of his happiness and best fortunes presented a picture to his mind that was not unattractive.

After their friends had departed, husband and wife discussed the question at great length. She urged the change, being driven by instinct to do so. He listened to her arguments, but said little and left the subject open for future discussion.

One aspect of it curiously fascinated him. Instead of disliking the idea of returning into the immediate neighbourhood of the Slannings' home, he found it attract him. It chimed with his shadowy thoughts of taking the offensive and striking a return blow for the many that he had suffered.

CHAPTER XIII

BACK TO BRIDGETSTOWE

WOLFERSTAN took his problem to his God and entered upon a patient and amiable phase of spirit. He had become more prayerful of late, and made renewed endeavours to do good at Okehampton. But it hurt him not a little to find that he did not carry quite the old weight. Even at the working men's club, which he had been instrumental in establishing, he was met with fewer courtesies and found himself upon a level with those who once granted and indicated his superiority. Other and more prosperous souls controlled affairs. More than once he was outvoted, and he observed a rational element grow daily in strength among the members. Prosperity and failure alike exude a subtle aroma, which men scent by instinct. Each carries an atmosphere, and few are able to conceal the approximate truth concerning that in which they move. When Wolferstan was the matter on men's tongues, it began to be felt that he did not get on; that he stood in a way to falsify predictions; that he had lost a part of his old winning and attractive manner. An edifice of false rumours arose upon foundations of truth; some for their own purposes decried him to advance personal ends; some declared such allegations false. But it became generally understood that he might return to Bridgetstowe; and when once the possibility arose, the certainty was accepted. Many positively asserted that Wolferstan meant to leave Okehampton, long before he had decided to do so. He heard it as a commonplace at business and at the club. It affected him not a little to observe that the event was alluded to with indifference.

"If I'd been going to Exeter in a big way, everybody would have come sneaking up to say they were sorry; but because I

may be returning to Bridgestowe in a small way, not a man cares a curse," he said to his wife.

"'Tis not a small way," she said. "You'll be all you was, and more. Can't a man return to his native place if it pleases him?"

"They don't want him there—not if he goes back poorer than he went out."

"You go back richer—every way. Richer if anything even in money."

Still he hesitated. Then a day came when he sought the desert rather than the market-place and spent long hours alone. He returned so late that Ilet had begun to grow anxious about him. He was ravenously hungry and ate his supper before he spoke a word.

Presently his wife loosed his tongue.

"'Tis so curious now, dear—as if we was changing places almost. When I was a girl, I was always for Dartmoor, and liked nought better than tramping up-along 'mongst the gert stones. But now 'tis you that goes to they old, lonesome tors, while I be the busy one and tramps down among the people."

He drank his beer, sighed the comfortable sigh that follows a hearty meal, and lighted his pipe. Then he answered her remark.

"Ban't much use my going among the people now. My bolt's shot. Nobody wants me no more."

Henny Pierce answered him.

"Don't you tell that nonsense, Dodd. You know a lot better. Of course they don't want you now. Why for should they? Who wants a man who don't know how to make up his mind? While you loaf here uncertain 'bout your plans, who should want 'e? If you had a job to-morrow—but there, what's the good of talking if you can't make up your mind?"

"I have made up my mind. I'm going."

Ilet jumped up and kissed him.

"That's great news, Dodd—great news. 'Tis for the bes., for certain. You know how strong I've felt for it ever since there was the first thought of it in the air."

"I went along of Joe Chastey last week," he said, "and we had a tell about things. He's not going on with that business to Launceston, but he's going to sell it and buy another business

in the same line at Tavistock. 'Twill take a good bit of time to fix up; but that's so much the better. He'll throw over Portreeve in a year or so; then, if they'll have me——"

"'Have you'! I should think they would!" cried Ilet.

"Of course—never was such a well-thought-on Portreeve as you," declared Mrs. Pierce.

"So there it stands. I go out of this in the spring. Now 'tis for us to look round. My heart wants more beasts, but my pocket says nursery gardening again, though 'twill be against the grain. However, I'm learning to bend my will—that's harder than to bend your back. God's in it all. If I didn't trust Him, I should go mad."

"'Tis a very proper thought—so us all should—for who else can be trusted?" asked old Henny. "There, I'm heartened up something wonnerful," she continued. "I do love a move—an' I'll be nearer my graves in Sourton churchyard—that is if you be going to take me along with you."

"Of course," said Ilet. "You're one of us, ban't you? Our good's yours."

"How will the little one be able to go on with her piano lessons to Bridgetstowe?" asked Dodd, suddenly moved to a small issue; as the mind will, when confronted with a great one.

"Let's drop 'em," said the mother. "They'll never be no use to——"

But Henny's step-father interrupted her passionately.

"She shall *not* drop them! Damn it, are we going to drop everything? 'Tis always 'drop this' and 'drop that'. She shall go on learning."

"Don't get so hot, my dear man. Of course she shall, if you like. I only said it to please you. An' seeing we've got a piano an' she's so clever at it—of course——"

He returned into good humour and did not see the older woman's horrified eyes shine, like little moons, in her withered face. She could not believe her ears, for she had never heard Wolfe:stan swear until that moment.

The excitement of the coming change kept them busy and occupied them through the winter. A measure of fair fortune overtook Wolferstan, and the best thing that happened to him was some return of self-respect. Bridgetstowe people expressed themselves as gratified that the native should return to his old

home. A house, of a size somewhat larger and position more important than his old bachelor dwelling, was forthcoming upon the road to Launceston. The rent seemed likely to strain his resources, but he decided for it on the strength of a rich and secluded garden. This land was surrounded by old cob walls against which grew the better sort of stone fruit. The trees had been well tended and were in a prosperous condition.

Ilet, unknown to Dodd, did much to increase the warmth of his future welcome. She was often in Bridgetstowe at this period, and made many friends. Incidentally she learnt of the Slannings, and hearsay by no means chimed with her own inner knowledge concerning her husband's enemy. The miller and his wife were both very popular and the sympathy extended to Ilet was bestowed tenfold upon Primrose. For Wolferstan's wife had a child, though not by him; Orlando Slanning was childless—a circumstance that awoke most active commiseration in the minds of the matrons of Bridgetstowe. Mrs. Slanning did no little practical good in her new sphere. She was said to be kind-hearted and known to be generous. She figured at philanthropic entertainments, took stalls at bazaars, performed her part in the country community, and went regularly to church. All spoke well of her; and thus a new problem faced Ilet. She was for taking it to her husband, but, instead, kept it to herself. How could a woman, inspired to active and obstinate malignity in one direction, order her life with justice and charity in every other? How could a fellow-creature be consistently evil to Wolferstan and good to everybody else? How could she cruelly plot and plan to spoil his life and ruin his hopes, even to the least of them, yet preserve, in every other relation and direction, a temperate, tolerant, kindly attitude? Was it that into this battle she poured all the bitterness of her nature, all the energy and determination of her character, leaving nothing else but a residuum of amiable indifferences? Or was it that Wolferstan had been mistaken, that his imagination had failed to digest facts and so induced a waking nightmare and delusion under which he still laboured? The problem rose beyond her power to solve. She knew that it must presently face her husband also, and hoped that the esteem in which the Slannings were held at Bridgetstowe might modify his fear and hatred of them.

The matter soon came on Dodd's own lips, for it happened

that during a market day he dined at 'The Royal Oak', and that Orlando Slanning—thrown out hunting—rode up at the hour of the mid-day meal and presently partook of it beside Wolferstan.

Not without irritation Dodd marked the esteem in which certain small farmers and tradesmen round them held the miller, and he even found himself treated more respectfully, because Slanning accosted him.

Orlando bore no malice and, though his last meeting with Dodd had not been friendly, he spoke now in his usual loud and amiable tones.

"So you're coming back, I hear, Wolferstan? You might do worse. Bridgestowe's not a bad little corner for a busy man."

"Plenty doing, no doubt," answered Dodd shortly.

"Rather! I know the place you've taken. I suppose you'll go in for gardening again? They say you rather burnt your fingers with the beasts."

"They say wrong as usual. I didn't burn my fingers; but a rascally tramp burnt my byre and many very valuable young heifers in it."

"Of course. I'd quite forgotten. Cruel bad luck."

"It was. For the minute I'm going gardening again. But I hope I shall soon be stock-raising. That's what I want to do."

"Shall you hunt?"

"Presently I hope to do so. I got a good offer for my big horse from one of the soldiers at the camp."

"One of your lodgers?"

Slanning, in sober honesty, meant no offence. It was an utterance characteristic of his stupidity—the bludgeon of a fool swung in pure innocence. Wolferstan had no right whatever to take offence; but he did so.

"It was a Major Tomlinson of the Royal Artillery," he answered with a change of manner; then rose from the table and prepared to leave it.

Slanning, however, had something else to mention.

"Don't go," he said. "Wait a minute till I've done—then I'll come with you."

He moderated his voice and spoke again, so that the other only could hear.

"I want to ask you a favour. Nobody knows the idea but me, and you needn't say I asked you. In fact, I'd rather you didn't. I'll bolt this pudding—then we'll go into the smoking-room and talk."

Soon they sat with their feet on a sanded floor and their noses in the reek of stale tobacco.

"It's this," said Slanning. "I want you to judge the ploughing matches here. If I suggest it, the committee will write you a formal request, and it won't do you any harm, but be a good advertisement for you."

Again innocently he blundered and did not guess that in the wounds of Wolferstan a very active poison of pride now festered.

"Why d'you ask me?" said Dodd.

"Well—because you know what ploughing means and we don't. Failing you, there's Farmer Chave; but he'll have two men in the competition. You'll be unprejudiced."

"Once a ploughboy, always a ploughboy; is that what you mean?"

"Good God, no! But you were the best man who ever drove a share here twenty years ago, so I'm told, and I thought——"

"I know what you thought—or your wife thought—to belittle me to my face—to insult and hurt me at my first coming back here. 'Tis all of a piece. But you've gone to the end of the tether. I warn you to do no more, for I'll stand no more."

Slanning stared in amazement. A maiden who had answered the bell appeared at the door, and waited for him to speak.

"Well, I'm——" began the miller, then stopped.

"What might you please to want, sir?" said the girl.

"Nothing, Nelly," he answered. "I meant to order—but this gentleman won't drink with me."

Nelly regarded Dodd curiously, then departed. Slanning rose.

"I'm sorry that everything I do and say is always turned into a bad meaning by you, Wolferstan. You won't go far here, or anywhere, if you're so jolly ready to misunderstand everybody and think that everybody wants to insult you, or some such damned nonsense. Anyway, it's a pretty feeble style to begin living in a new place—to quarrel with one of the leading men of the district. You had some name for sense once; but I should say Okehampton has knocked all the sense out of you."

He marched from the room and left Wolferstan with a stormy heart. Dodd did not believe in the worthiness of Orlando's motives and did not regret his own harsh words.

"He'll tell them to her," he said when detailing the incident to Het. "He'll tell her how I spoke, and she'll see that I know everything and am not deceived. So much the better."

CHAPTER XIV

CLOUDS

AFTER lengthy inaction, renewed labour sweetened the heart and mind of Dodd Wolferstan. He set to work upon his garden, completed various arrangements, and sold such cattle as he still possessed. Waves of bitterness sometimes swept his spirit when he reflected upon the altitude of his ambitions and the humble aspect of reality; but Ilet was always swift to bring common-sense consolations, and her own restored peace of mind went far to support him. Not always, however, did she say the just word. Occasionally her speeches, uttered with artless soul, cut both ways, and tortured.

"'Tis only so many years of learning and getting wiser," she said once. "I do love to think you'll be plain Portreeve again—as you was when first I met you."

She spoke to cheer him in an evil hour; but her words acted contrariwise and cast him down.

Before the arrival of spring they had left Okehampton and were settled in their new home. The move proved expensive, but nothing could quell Ilet's sanguine heart at this season and something of her cheerful spirit impressed itself upon her husband. He found it well to be among the familiar scenes again. Every gate and meadow was a friend, and the hearty greeting of the people seemed also good to him. Many of whom he had lost note during recent years came to see the man, and there was little but kindness and pleasure exhibited at his return. He noted the passage of the years, marked familiar names that had dropped out and new ones now in the mouths of the folk. He did not grudge the older men their weight in local matters, but a throb of envy woke when those he had known as lads now saluted an equal in him and spoke and jested without ceremony. Not so they talked of the Slannings. Orlando, thanks to his wife and

the restraining influences of increasing age, had won a real reputation. People admitted that he entertained a cheerful conceit of himself and did not hide from his left hand the good deeds performed by his right ; but good deeds were done, and the miller's kindness of heart outweighed his weakness of head. None could forget his virtues, because the hamlet was repeatedly and practically reminded of them.

Wolferstan debated long as to his future attitude towards Orlando Slanning. Ilet herself raised the question and unconsciously tickled his pride.

"As Portreeve you'll be a leading man again," she said, "and you're bound to be thrown against him and other uppermost people pretty soon."

He admitted it.

"I've always known how to go among 'em, and always shall, I suppose," he answered. "As to him, the case is different. When us have met he's never lost the opportunity to drop gall, and I've always been pretty quick to show him I knew what he was playing at. But now—well, for my part I'll let bygones be bygones willingly enough, so far as he's concerned. He's only a tool. Time will soon show what she means. And I shall act according. I talked a good deal of silly nonsense last year, when I was cut up about it all ; but I feel my feet firmer under me again now, thank God, and I see the way a lot clearer. My Christianity seemed to go to sleep for a bit. 'Twas a very dreadful thing, Ilet, and a terrible black mark against a man ; for when we get listless in religious matters, 'tis our own fault and our own sin. There was a screw loose ; but now 'tis tight again and I can look the world in the face and say I've failed by the will of God ; and that now I be going to try and succeed by the will of God."

"'Tis like your greatness, Dodd ; an', pushed home, that means 'twas the will of God these things befell you. But surely God wouldn't use dirty tools to do His cleaning work in our souls ; therefore it may hap that all you've thought and feared touching that woman be false. Oh, my dear man, think what a weight off your shoulders if you could say, 'I've blamed her falsely. She's innocent of evil ; she's what other people think her, not what I think her. She's only come into my ill luck by chance, and 'tis the Devil makes me hate her !'"

"If I could do that——"

"You could, Dodd. 'Tis just a thing your big spirit and Christian thoughts would rise to, if you only pray to God to help you."

He remained silent with the magnitude of the thought.

"There'd be a large Christianity about it, sure enough," he said. "A Christianity to make angels wonder."

"An' 'tis within your power. You could say to-morrow that you'd read the events in your life wrongly and mistook them. You could say that, looking into your own self, you began to see what it all meant—and began to find God's hand in it, not another's."

"All the same, we must keep common sense, Ilet. I might swear this minute that there's no more malice left in me; but high thoughts mustn't sweep us into silliness. What you ask—'tis beyond reason."

"And haven't you often said that religion is beyond reason and above it? That you have. You've taught me—me that believed little enough when I came to you—you've taught me all it means to trust God through thick and thin. Can't you take back a little of the teaching to yourself just now?"

"I'll think of it; I'll see if my mind can lift to it without upsetting my reasoning parts, Ilet. 'Twould be a mighty relief and comfort if I could say from my heart, 'That woman's not responsible for the past';—but—I'll make it a praying matter."

"Then 'twill come right," she said.

"Barkell's with you there in one sort of way," he added. "Though I've little patience with him, I feel there's sense in his scourge sometimes. He's sour oftener than sweet, but so's physic, and so's life. That man, if he had faith, might have been a great power for good."

"He's with me—how?" she asked. "Ban't often Dicky would agree with me, I should reckon."

"In a way he is, for he says that a man brews his own drink and none can do that for him. When I said, in a weak hour, that woman had ruined me; he answered 'twas no such thing, but that I'd ruined myself, and that no strength or craft of any man or woman in the world could ruin me, unless I let 'em have the power."

Ilet was surprised.

"I should reckon that was pretty near to a Christian thought," she said. "It shows that, clever though he may be, them ban't born that's cleverer than the Bible."

"No harm can get into a man unless the door be opened to it from inside—that's his motto. Mind, I'm not saying if 'tis supported by the Bible; but there's a lot in it. Suppose, for instance, I say that what's happened to me be all good and to my betterment; then, if I can believe it so, I'm not hurt at all, but just the other way. Suppose I say the things that have fallen out have made me wiser, patienter, gentler with the world, larger-hearted and such-like?"

"The thing is to say it, dear."

He shook his head.

"No; the thing is to believe it. I can't yet. Perhaps I shall some day. Perhaps I shall come to it on my knees afore the throne of Grace. But not yet. There's much that's too near and too raw and green yet to let me think on it without smarting. But I'm learning; I'm looking forward with more patience and feel a larger mind growing up in me, Ilet."

Little happened until autumn time; then with the approaching departure of Joe Chastey the question of their new Portreeve stirred Bridgetstowe. Meanwhile Wolferstan was busy, and he and Ilet had strengthened his old friendships and established new ones. The opinion was that he had but to ask to receive the dignity. Yet he waited and hoped that instead of soliciting the appointment, he might be invited to accept it. The future dawned in a manner very promising, and it seemed that success was to come from tilling the soil rather than rearing of beasts. The new garden answered generously to his knowledge.

In due course certain responsible people inquired whether Wolferstan would care to fill his old position, and he consented to do so. But within a week of the agreement, and while Mr. Chastey had still a month of office to complete his term, there happened news of a nature very startling. Dodd held it in his bosom for a week, then it reached Ilet's ears and was soon generally known at Bridgetstowe. With this intelligence the clouds that had appreciably lifted from Wolferstan's life, increased a thousandfold and returned upon him; with it there vanished the slow and gradual building up of belief that, after all, he had wronged Primrose Slanning. Now no doubt remained

that his former fears were true. He had returned but little more than six months to his old home when her hand was lifted again. None who knew the past could doubt the meaning of the present. Charity, nourished by his wife, and faith, fortified by his own devout nature, alike fell down before this stroke.

Ilet saw him as she had seen him during their last year at Okehampton; she marked how he fell once more upon a fitful gloom that drew him into the uplifted and secret wilderness. Again he was dark by day and distrustful of all men; again in the night watches, while she woke, he tossed and murmured evil words against destiny from a storm of dreams.

As usual he took his affairs by a sort of instinct to the man who habitually brought him least comfort. But it happened that Barkell had already heard some of the facts, and Wolferstan's news did not astonish him.

The signalman was at home and spending a holiday of one week's duration there. He had planned for this short leisure a trip to London; but his father was ill, and he occupied the time in nursing him. Abner's rheumatism had increased, and, after a wetting, he took cold and for some days suffered much torment. Now he was better. His bed had been drawn up to the window so that he might see Meldon Viaduct, and he uttered many expressions of concern respecting the fabric. It was the first time for twenty years that he had not daily visited it, and he expressed the most grave uneasiness that the great bridge should have suffered this misfortune.

"But 'twill have to come. 'Tis the thin end of the wedge—a warning like," he said to his son. "I can't be after it much longer. I'll be a bed-lier presently and no good to the bridge no more. The Company have got to face it, and I hope they will. I can't go on for ever—worse luck. Though when I think of the Happy Land and no gert bridge to be tended up-along—'tis a woeful thought."

"Perhaps they'll let you hover about an' look after it sti'll, my old dear," said Dicky.

But Abner shook his head.

"That's no good. 'Twould only get on my nerves to see some old fool buzzing about the bridge, an' drawing good money, an' very like doing nought for it."

On the day that Wolferstan visited his friends, their previous

talk had reference to him. It was an afternoon in November, and Meldon gorge sounded full of the hoarse cry of Oke in spate. Round about, the world turned to serq of winter; hurrying leaves leapt and flew in the air; the Moor was cloud-capped and none had seen Yes Tor's summit for three days.

"His case stands this way," said Dicky, holding a light to his father's pipe and then poking the fire. "The man was to be Portreeve again, and may yet be so. But 'tis no certainty, because another have rose up against him. The other chap's all right, and there was a talk of him years ago, even before Joe Chastey took it on. He wouldn't have come forward against Wolferstan, but it seems that he's got strong friends, who want him to run for it. An' those strong friends are miller Slanning and his lady."

"Then Dodd'll make us believe against our will that he's right in the matter of them people."

"I always did believe it. I knew it. I told him afore his wedding day that 'twould be so—from my knowledge of facts. But the interesting thing is that he was beginning to doubt it himself. Such is the hopefulness of that man—or his wife more like—that despite all he's suffered, he actually began to think he'd been wrong and that they were only his enemies in his own misty mind and not in reality! 'Twas a triumph of faith over reason. But this has killed it, I judge."

"He'd set his heart upon playing Portreeve again."

"He won't—not if Mrs. Slanning can prevent it."

"I hope his religion will bear the shock."

"'Twill want a bit of bracing to do it, father."

"As to that, let no man interfere. There be critical pinches in our fortunes, when it's no true friendship to God to ram Him down our neighbours' throats. The Almighty only gets rude things said about Him if we let on about His manifold goodness just when everything's going crooked with a chap. Wolferstan's no got the temper he had, and, for that matter, I never yet met the just man who could see himself grossly ill-treated, through no fault of his own, without making a bit of a fuss about it. We know the hairs of our heads be numbered—an' no doubt the numbers are duly entered—but there are times when it don't comfort a man to tell him so; an' if Dodd's going to be kept out

of Portreeve, God's Self may calm him down, but talking about God won't, for sartain."

"You say 'ill-treated through no fault of his own'. That's the point. Who's going to say where the fault lies? Can we reap the misery what another have sown—except the misery of our own weak bodies or weak heads sown by our fathers an' mothers?"

"That holds in everything, and be like one of your damned silly questions, as no mortal man can answer," snapped Abner. "You'd put all our faults and failings down to them that got us, and them that got them. That's no better than bullying the dead, if you ax me. Not that they'll care."

"A very sharp thought for such an old man," said Dicky. "You often say a cleverer thing than you know, father."

"And you often say a sillier thing than what you've any idea of," answered the veteran. "'Tis along of your eggication. You take in more than you can tackle, Richard."

At this juncture Wolferstan appeared and told them what they already knew. Another man had been proposed for the vacant position. Opinions were divided. The man did not want to stand, but those interested in him insisted upon it. There was to be an election in six weeks' time.

"Roger Bartlett stood foreman at 'Slanning's' twelve years ago," explained Dodd. "He's just my age and doing for himself now. He knows the work well enough, but he's no horse-man, and won't be able to go out over the Bridgetstowe Commons as I can."

"Is he wishful to stand against you?"

"Not at all. I axed him straight. He can't help himself. He's obliged, for certain reasons, to Orlando Slanning, and Slanning's reminded him of the fact and explained to him that he wants a friend as Portreeve. Of course I see it all crystal clear. 'Tis nothing to Slanning—everything to her. Her hand's in it. She'll win."

"That's the question," said Dicky. "Why for should she? Given a fair and square election, and you ought to romp home."

"Fair and square are no words to apply to anything she does. She'll win, I tell you."

"'Twill be your fault if you let her then. Why, almost the last time we talked about her, you said you'd take no more, that you'd

give as good as you got henceforth—and maybe better. Go in and win, and see her man damned—eh, father?"

"See him beat, certainly. If the law gives me a vote, 'tis yours, Dodd—even though I have to spend two shilling on summat to drive me to the election."

"Thank you, Abner—I know that. And a good few others think the same. I shall fight it, for certain. If I'm beat——"

"You won't be beat," said Mr. Barkell. "Us all know what a pattern of a Portreeve you made, tearing round the country on your great hoss. Why, Bartlett be a market huekster and holder of cottage property—not the right chap at all."

"And don't go to church neither," said Dicky. "That's a fact, for he thinks much as I do."

"He's got them behind him, however. You know what Bridgestowe is. You've only got to tell the people often enough you're a fine fellow, an' they'll soon believe you. Look at Slanning himself."

"'Tis the same everywhere, for that matter," said Dicky. "You must advertise your good parts, for the world's too busy to find 'em out for itself. But, to make up for that, it's always quite ready to believe you, if you can bawl loud enough to catch its ears."

"You'll win all right," declared Mr. Barkell. "You're a tried man at the game. You did the work well—better than Chastey did. The people know you're a first-rate Portreeve. They don't know that Bartlett would be."

"There's nothing to it really—more than the honour and glory," explained Dodd. "For my part, I didn't overmuch want it till I heard this. Now, have it I will, or there'll be a reckoning. I won't be hit no more without hitting back."

Abner shook his head.

"Don't you tell like that. Go about the job in a prayerful and a sportsmanlike spirit, Dodd. Don't talk about what you'll do if you'm bested. Go at it like a lion, and take jolly good care you'm ~~not~~ bested."

Dicky seconded this advice and the conversation changed. But it drifted back to Wolferstan again and again, and rarely left him. The fact Abner marked when he had gone.

"A very different man to what he was," he said. "One time other folk comed first in his thoughts; now they never come at

all ; one time he'd have been full of care to see me struck down an' twisted like this, and groaning at the fall of a leaf ; but now—not a word about my illness—did you mark that ? A very own-self man he'm growing. 'Tis a bad failing, for it cuts away friends quicker than anything."

"You're right," said Dicky. "Ban't any sign of power to see a man playing a lone hand. What's the strength of one to the strength of a score ? Or the love of one to the love of twenty ? 'Tis better to have twenty people on your side than to have only yourself your side and the twenty against you. An' that I see clear enough, though nobody ever loved me, and nobody ever will, or can, according to my own nature."

"You take a lot of knowing, without a doubt, to say it fatherly, Richard," declared his parent.

CHAPTER XV

DICKY VISITS ORLANDO

THE forthcoming contest for the office of Portreeve deeply stirred Bridgetstowe, and woke a surprising amount of attention. Interest ripened into party feeling, for there was a section of the community that held it a duty to vote as their betters desired ; and it presently appeared that the Slannings had influenced many persons to advance Roger Bartlett's cause. But the Vicar of Bridgetstowe was on Wolferstan's side, and he commanded numerous votes. A fortnight before the election, opinions were pretty equally divided between the opponents ; and Dodd's best friends deplored delay, for it was soon apparent that he did not assist his candidature, or conduct his campaign with wisdom. He posed as a man with a bitter grievance. He had some words with Bartlett and blamed him harshly for standing at all. He gave out that his opponent was Orlando Slanning's creature, and openly declared that neither the miller nor his man understood the duties of Portreeve. Some agreed with him ; others did not ; a few were turned from him by his unwise attitude. Mr. Bartlett had many friends, and his more sedate bearing at this juncture led thoughtful men to judge him as actually a better candidate. The observant noted that Dodd was changed since last he dwelt amongst them. They knew not the reasons, but deplored a visible degeneracy. A shrewd man marked that even Wolferstan's diction had declined somewhat. He spoke more like the people than he was wont to speak.

The curate of Bridgetstowe had speech with old Henny Pierce, and ventured to hint that Wolferstan would be better employed in minding his private business than in labouring for his election.

"Let him leave it to his friends," he said. "He's in a fair way to win, I believe ; but he's not doing himself any good by talking

so much. Try to get him to keep in his garden by day and in his house by night. You understand? Plenty of good fellows are busy for him."

This excellent advice swiftly reached Dodd's ear; but unfortunately Henny peppered it a trifle with her own flavouring. She knew Wolferstan well, appreciated his qualities, and regretted his failings. But these she clearly saw, and the memory of her dead son served rather to accentuate by comparison the defects of Ilet's second husband. Time is compact of charity, and while softening what was unbeautiful in the loved dead, yearly adds lustre to their better part. Now Abel Pierce in his mother's mind dwelt as the gracious memory of a gentle-hearted man, who did right in the sight of God, loved little children and justified his existence. Passing, he left behind the recollection of a good son, a good husband and a good father. But Wolferstan presented no such perfect picture to Mrs. Pierce's observation. She marked and chid his faults. In dark moods he grew impatient with her and hinted at providing for her elsewhere; at other times he told Ilet that she was good for them and must be endured.

When opportunity came Henny repeated the curate's counsel in her own words. The time was pat, for Wolferstan had been grumbling to some men who visited him after supper. Then they departed and Mrs. Pierce spoke.

"How you think you'm helping yourself by all this chattering, I don't know, Dodd," she said.

"What d'you mean?" he asked.

"Why, surely nought tires people worse than listening to a man with a grievance. Them chaps was all yawning their heads off while you jawed to 'em. They only waited till thicky bottle was empty, then up they got an' away."

"They're all my side, however. You must be civil to them as be going to vote for you, I should think."

"Civil as you please. But what's the good of blackguarding Roger Bartlett all the time? And Slocom is his own cousin, an' a shifty man, as you can see in his eye. Every word you said will go back to Bartlett."

"I don't care if they do. Truth's truth."

"It may be; truth's libel too, so often as not. You defamed the man's character by saying he was under Mr. Slanning's thumb. An' 'tis well known he never says a word against you."

"I should think he didn't! What word should he say against me?"

"Well—he might say you let your tongue run away with you sometimes. That wouldn't be far short of the truth anyway."

The man showed irritation.

"It gets harder and harder to please you," he answered. "Of course if you're against me——"

"That's likely, isn't it? To be against my own bread and board? No, I'm for you heart and soul. That's why I speak what wiser people than me think. If you'd only stick to your work and not talk so much, you'd get the job; but you can't helping yourself by being so busy. You're surprising people, and not very pleasantly neither."

"Who told you to tell me this?" he asked bluntly.

"No matter for that. Ax yourself if 'tis good advice or bad."

He said nothing. Then she stabbed him to the quick, though not intentionally.

"Keep away from everybody till afterwards. Let 'em all remember you as you were—not as you are."

He flamed and started to his feet. Ilet, who had listened to this conversation, also rose. The old woman glanced at them, then held her needle to the lamp and threaded it.

"That's how you pay for your keep," said Dodd coarsely. "That's how you sting the hand that feeds you. You're an evil-minded old liar, and you know it. How can a man change? I can't changed one hair. I'm the same as I always was—I'm—— But what's the good of talking to you? Another time, when my friends come to see me, just you keep out of the way. And when I want vinegar from you——"

He broke off and prepared to depart. Ilet begged him not to do so. But he refused, in a voice like the slamming of a door. A moment afterwards he had gone out.

Henny worked on unmoved; Ilet also kept silence for a while; then she spoke.

"Why did you say that? 'Twas an awful cruel thing to say, mother."

"Not so cruel as to keep it from him. If once he could see himself changed, he might fight back to his old self belike. So long as he thinks everybody else is in fault and himself blameless,

he'll go on this fool's way till the folk be wearied of him. 'Twasn't so once, and you know it better'n anybody. You're right to love him and stick up for him ; but don't believe all this stuff about plans and plots and enemies behind every gatepost. The truth is that nobody cares a farthing about him now—one way or t'other. 'Tis his business to make friends, like he used to make 'em—not foes."

"That's true. All the same, there's one terrible enemy be real enough. We can't pretend different. But for her, Bartlett would never have wanted to be Portreeve. For that matter, he doesn't now."

"Then 'tis for us to be better than her, and beat her side by force of right. 'Twas Mr. Sim, the curate, told me he was putting his foot in it by talking so much."

"I've knowed it too. I'll say a cautious word when he's cool again. And I'll tell you another thing that's very much in my mind of late : that is to see her—Mrs. Slanning. When first the thought came I put it away—then it came again ; and every day it's at me—a sort of force driving me to go to her, woman to woman, and plead with her to drop it."

"He'd wring your neck if he caught you out in that."

"I needn't tell him. Anyway he wouldn't rage long, I reckon. 'Tis a wife's place, surely, to fight for a man if she has the power? I might do much."

"No, you wouldn't. If Mrs. Slanning's all he thinks her, she'd laugh at you, and take very good care that he should know after as you'd been to her. He may ballyrag me till he's black in the face, and no harm done ; but it won't do for him to fall out with you."

"That's impossible."

"Nought's impossible when a man's mind grows weak. That sort quarrels with their best friend first. Don't you give him the chance to fall out with you. 'Twould be the end of all things if he done that."

"Nothing I could do would bring it about."

"All the same, hold off from her. That's what I say, Ilet. Just busy yourself with keeping the man in a good temper till they decide about it. If he gets it, 'twill be the beginning of better things very like ; for his temper always depends on how the wind blows ; and if it blows fair, he'll soon be better com-

pany. If it don't—if he loses, then 'twill be time enough to do summat."

Ilet felt the worth of this advice and thanked Henny for it.

"I wish he'd listen to you oftener, for you've got the wisdom of years behind you," she said. "Anyway, I'll keep off from 'Slanning's' till after, and do what I can to make him easy."

"'Tis Sacrament Sunday to-morrow," said Henny. "Make him go. The Lord's supper works wonders in the man for forty-eight hours, and sometimes more."

Wolferstan returned before they had finished talking; and his first act was to kiss Mrs. Pierce and express profound contrition and sorrow for his offence. Whereupon her firm attitude crumbled, and she wept, and forgave him and begged him to forgive her.

Meantime the events of the coming election had worked a wonder in another quarter and moved Richard Barkell to a definite deed. A thing that he had been morally powerless to perform on his own account, proved possible for a friend. He appreciated the immense importance of the coming election, and reluctantly decided with himself that he must endeavour to help Wolferstan. The younger Barkell was but little known, for, as became a contemplative man, he kept much to himself and seldom frequented company. Certainly not twenty people in Bridgetstowe had spoken with him, and perhaps not fifty knew of his existence. But that fact did not alter his plans. He had no intention to canvass amongst the voters, or by any such means advance his friend. A greater enterprise occupied his mind. Its futility seemed assured; yet he felt the attempt worth making. In the first place Dodd would not hear of it; and at worst, this thing he proposed could not lessen the chances of success. Barkell therefore strung himself to do a deed very foreign to his natural instincts. When leisure came, he put on his best clothes, took train from Okehampton to Bridgetstowe, and walked over to 'Slanning's' to see the master of the mill.

Orlando was at home, in a little room where he transacted his business. Evening had already fallen. On hearing that a man wanted to see him, he came to the front door; but finding the stranger attired in broadcloth, invited him to enter.

Barkell wasted no time. He sat down, put his hard hat beside him, fixed his eyes on the other's face and began.

"I hope you'll excuse me for troubling you, Mr. Slanning. I don't know that 'twas a very clever thing for me to come to you; but 'tis for another rather than myself."

"I haven't got an hour's work for anybody, if that's what you want. There are too many lazy chaps here already."

"They are everywhere. There's no escape from lazy chaps, so long as the law don't make it a crime. No, I'm not after work. My name's Barkell, and I'm a railway signalman on the L. and S.W. Dodd Wolferstan is a friend of mine, and I've made so bold as to come here unknown to him about this business."

"You're a meddler then?"

Barkell laughed. His sense of humour was tickled by this word applied to him.

"Not a doubt of it, though if there's a sort of man I can't abide, 'tis that sort. But a meddler I am in this job, and you've only got to tell me to go about my business, and I'll do so gladly. I don't take to it."

"The election, I suppose?"

"Yes. Mind I've no right to ask you questions, Mr. Slanning—no right, but some reason. That man's welfare hangs on this job. If he fails, you may have a ruined man on your mind. I say this to you and I come to you, because you hold this election in the hollow of your hand. Of course everybody knows that."

Slanning had meant to cut the interview short; but Dicky's flattery pleased him.

"I suppose I do. Well, I'm keen on Roger Bartlett."

"And that fact as good as settles the business. I was wondering if such a sportsman and such a renowned man for justice as you are—to be a J.P. they tell me—I was wondering if you'd thought of what a thing it is to decide this election just by your own nod."

"How can I help that? Bartlett's my candidate." • —

"He's standing out of respect to you, because you wished it."

"A very good reason."

"The best possible, Mr. Slanning. Don't think I'd presume to say different. Only I ventured to wonder if you'd thought what a difference it would make to Wolferstan—your being

against him. If your wishes were not known, 'twould have been a fair fight and no favour; but your name in the countryside—you know what it is. Once let the people hear what you wish, and they'll go your way, like sheep after the bell-wether. You're the leading power here."

"So much the better for my candidate."

"I know; but is it so much the better for you? You're famed for fearless justice. You do good with both hands. The poor look up to you. Well, now, if you throw your weight into the scale against Wolferstan—does it seem to you, as a man of great ideas and great principles, that you are being just? 'Tis a terrible serious thing to have such strength as you have. Not many could be trusted with it."

"I know that. It makes me feel rather solemn sometimes when I look around the parish."

"It would, no doubt. Not but what all men with brains are like to be solemn. Only the light-headed can ever be light-hearted, Mr. Slanning."

"I don't say that. I have my joke with the best."

"Yes, your jokes, I believe, are well thought on and remembered long after you've forgot 'em. At the last hunt dinner—But this is no joke. Wolferstan's had a spell of terrible bad luck, and he's struggling hard to get his head out of water again. He's awful sorry he was foolish enough to say a rude thing to you. He told me so with his own lips. But I told him that nothing he could say could hurt you, though it might hurt himself."

"That's exactly what happened——"

Ormsd rose and shut the door.

"I was quite prepared to be friendly to the fellow after—after certain things fell out. But he proved to be quite impossible."

"Give him another chance, Mr. Slanning. A bit of luck would be the salvation of him. You'd never regret it. 'Twould be a proud day for you, to know you'd made a man by just a word."

Slanning was silent and the other continued cautiously.

"You see, he's had his trials same as you, if I may say it without impertinence. 'Twas his dream and hope to have a family; but it has been denied him by a very unhappy chance. You're in the same fix. To a man of your large views and high education, these cruel things don't matter so much, because you've got intellect and brain power to lift you up; but he's

a very unphilosophical man and soon worked up into wrath. Yet a very useful man. Even you might find that out some day. You never know who may not come in useful."

"I haven't an enemy in the world to my knowledge."

"Or anybody's knowledge, Mr. Slanning. The thing is whether, as such a tower of justice, you can overthrow this man right away in this manner."

"To tell you the truth," said Slanning, "the same idea has occurred to me several times. I am a sportsman, as you say, and I'm awfully keen on justice—that's why I've let it be known I want to be a J.P. And no doubt I shall be made one pretty soon."

"And a very good thing for the countryside when you are, if I may say so. You see, it isn't as if Roger Bartlett *wanted* to be Portreeve. He's had to offer for it, because you told him to do so; but if you just let the thing take its course—— Why, a nod from you goes further than a speech from another man. I'll wager that even now, with only a week to go, if you was to say that, on second thoughts, you reckoned the old Portreeve might best fill the post, the word would fly on every tongue and Wolferstan would win."

"I couldn't do that—really."

"No, Mr. Slanning, you could not—not now; but I'm only saying that you've the power. Of course you couldn't go so far openly—but 'tis wonderful what tact and skill will do. Bartlett would be mighty glad to lose for one, I do believe. He'd thank you to let him off."

Slanning reflected upon his wife.

For a moment he changed the subject. ~~Barkell's~~ Barkell's eccentric face and flagrant flattery pleased him. He wanted to hear a few more pleasant things, if possible.

"I'm not a conservative in these matters, and believe in change, you know. By change I mean that I have got rather extended views on progress and all that. I've seen the world. You can't be a conservative if you've seen the world, Barkell."

"True for you, Mr. Slanning. I do hope that some day you'll be tempted to stand for Parliament yourself. 'Tis men with your views we badly want."

"Parliament—eh? That's rather a big order."

"If you can get votes in a little matter by holding up your

finger, think of the votes you'd get in a big matter by going afore the people yourself! Why, the whole countryside would come forward!"

"It's a rum thing," declared Orlando with a pleased cackle, "but they do all seem to want to know my opinion. 'What does Mr. Slanning think?' That's the question people always ask each other before they do anything here."

"Very much to their credit. 'Tis the likes of you, as have seen the world, must think for the likes of us, who haven't."

"But I'm a red radical. I warn you of that, Barkell."

"And so's all the wisest. They'd cheer you to the echo. I know what you'd tell 'em, Mr. Slanning, for I see it in your face."

"Yes? Yes?"

"You'd say that you'd no patience with all this bunkum about birth. You'd say that we all had the same number of forbears—king and tinker; but that the difference was, the king's was remembered and the tinker's forgot. You'd say 'twas the best joke in the world, that a man should be on top just because his father got there. Why, 'twould be as good sense to hang a man, because his father was hung, as to stick him up to make laws and dictate to the nation, because his father did. All such things you'd say, and carry everybody with you—I can most hear you doing it—in better language, of course, than I've got."

"I've often thought that myself. Liberty is the idea. Freedom for all."

"Right! The case in a nutshell. I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you for putting these things so clear to me, Mr. Slanning. But I didn't hesitate to come, when a friend told me you'd got a ear for the least among us."

"That's true. Any man can approach me. There's no side about me—not a spark."

"No; but there's a wonderful deal of sense. 'Tis amazing, if I may say it, how quick you took my point about Wolferstan."

"I can't do anything outright, you know; but I'm very much of your mind—really. Circumstances over which I had no control—at least not that—but there were reasons. However, I'll do what can be done. It's dangerous"—he was thinking of Primrose—"at least, not dangerous, but difficult even for me, at the eleventh hour——"

"I know how difficult. If it had been anybody else, I shouldn't have come, because I should have understood 'twould have been too late; but with you, I felt that there it was—in the hollow of your hand, to do or not to do."

Dicky got up. *

"And if you ever stand for Parliament, I know they that think as I do will try and get you in, Mr. Slanning. I can promise you there's a lot of 'em about, anyway."

"Slake hands," said Orlando. "You're a man of sense, and I'm glad to meet you. If ever anything happens where I can be of use to you, let me know."

"Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Slanning. They didn't tell me a word about you that wasn't true," said Dicky with fine irony. "'Tis great kindness in you to have heard me so patiently; and I'm very much in your debt; and if Wolferstan gets in now, I shall say you're a born wonder—a leader of men, I'm sure."

"Don't mention this conversation, however—not to anybody at all. It may interfere with my plans."

"I promise that," answered the signalman.

Then he went his way with renewed thanks.

"Mention it," he thought. "Not very likely! I do believe I'm ashamed of myself—though I never yet felt so afore. What a damned humbug a man may be and never know it! If I was made of brass instead of mud, I should have been the very chap for a Labour Candidate myself!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE ELECTION

THERE broke a lifeless and a leaden dawn of flying clouds, flattened layer upon layer by fierce winds from the South-East. At five o'clock the blind of Ilet's bedroom was lifted on the morning of the election, and she looked out at the desolation of the sky. Grey billows of vapour rolled down off the distant Moor in sulky, sad-coloured confusion of mingled gloom and light. The earth planes beneath stretched flat and chaotic as a picture unfinished. Only the wind made a great activity on their surfaces, and, in the semi-darkness, the trees tossed and shed their thinning foliage, and the multitudes of the leaves now flew along the sky, now ran in little companies upon the empty road. Roots were not yet garnered, and the lush foliage of swedes and mangolds caught the gathering light as it winnowed down out of the grey, and reflected it with dim flashings when the wind moved their leaves. Severity and simplicity were the qualities of this dawn. Presently cocks challenged and others answered with distant clarions. As though waiting the signal, rain began steadily to fall. Ilet unconsciously felt that a spirit of hopelessness heralded day. She turned half in a mood again to join her husband where he still slept; but instead she rose, called her daughter, and went downstairs to light the fire.

The election would begin at nine o'clock and terminate at noon.

Wolferstan took his breakfast soon after six, then worked for a while. Anon he changed his clothes, which were wet, and talked of going into the village.

With the separate actions of his wife and himself upon this day it is necessary to be concerned. She was first astir, and whereas he did not set out much before mid-day, Ilet was at the polling station in the church vestry an hour earlier. She spoke with

John and Thomas Ball, who had come to support Dodd, and then she welcomed others of his friends. Barkell was not able to visit Bridgetstowe until the evening.

Johnny Ball could give Ilet little encouragement. The voters made no secret of their purpose, and he rather feared that more were on the other side. At best Wolferstan thus far could be said to hold no advantage. While she waited, some twenty men appeared, and they cheered her. Nearly all were for her husband. There was a rumour abroad that Roger Bartlett had changed his mind and actually begged his friends not to elect him. Some even said that Orlando Slanning was also indifferent and had been heard to declare at the 'Royal Oak' that he cared not a button who won. The next batch of voters were more disposed to keep their own counsel, and Ilet feared that they were against her. One, who smarted from some foolish remark levelled against him overnight by Dodd, now opened his mind to her and spoke harshly against her husband.

"He'm not fitted for Portreeve, or dustman either, or any man's work," he said. "There's no steadfastness to him—can't stand a word. He makes enemies so fast as once he made friends. And let me tell you, ma'am, it won't pay him to be blustering here now, with nought behind him but ten years of failure; and so I told him. Let him go to the plough-tail again, and larn patience and modesty. I ban't going to vote for him—not after last night—and so you can tell him."

It seemed that others were also of this mind; but presently there followed friends, so that Ilet's spirit lifted. Then more opponents appeared, and anon Roger Bartlett himself entered the vestry. He knew Mrs. Wolferstan well enough, and now took her aside and spoke with her.

"I hope to God I don't get it," he said; "and between you and me, Mr. Slanning hopes so too. He wants for your husband to get in—now. Something have changed him, and both him and me, on the quiet, have been trying to make 'em vote that way. But don't you breathe a word about it, else harm might happen."

"What's changed him?" she asked.

"I can't tell you. I only wish he'd known his mind sooner. But I've let everybody I could, hear that I was off the thing and didn't wish for to have it. So I hope the day will go against me. But don't tell my wife, or I should never hear the end of it."

An old determination, long held in check, reanimated Ilet at this knowledge. She had done no more in that matter, after Henny Pierce's advice, and yet strong impulses still dragged her towards Primrose. She felt that with her might lie the great and final move; that one woman with another might plead to good purpose upon such a case. Here, while the election was undecided—now, at this critical stage in her husband's fortunes, seemed the properest moment for an attack. She withstood her own heart no longer, and set out for 'Slanning's' an hour before the end of the election. She passed her home and saw Dodd still in the garden. He had changed his mind, resumed his work, and determined not to enter the village until the election was at an end. He was digging near the front gate, but she took care that he should not see her as she passed.

The mill was nearly two miles off, and before Ilet had gone half that distance the rain began to fall heavily. It wetted her shoulders and sunbonnet; but she was deep in thought as to what she should presently say, and had no mind for the weather.

A man, riding fast, came round a corner and nearly ran over her. She leapt aside, and he stopped and spoke.

"Not hurt, I hope? I'm sorry, but you must have been asleep, I should think. Hullo! It's Mrs. Wolferstan!"

The speaker was Orlando Slanning.

"My fault, sir," she said. "I didn't ought to have been in the middle of the road like that."

"Glad to meet you, anyway. Is the result known?"

"Not yet."

He ~~looked~~ at his watch.

"Just twelve now. Well, look here—lucky I met you. I hope your husband's in. You stare, but it's true. I do really. As a sportsman I do. For the last week I've wished it. Bartlett's all right, but he can't sit a horse. Be hopeful. I'll bet Wolferstan's in."

"I wish you'd thought of that before, Mr. Slanning."

"So do I; but the sporting side didn't strike me. Don't you say a word, Mrs. Wolferstan; but I've worked harder for your husband this week—on the quiet, you know—than I did against him before. He must be in, unless a good many men have told me lies. Where are you going now, if I may ask? You ought to be waiting for the news."

"I'm going to see Mrs. Slanning."

"The deuce you are!"

"Yes—of course you know all this means. It's a delicate thing for a woman to say to you—yet a woman can speak to another woman."

"Don't say you've met me then, or repeat what I've just said to you."

"I'll say nought, but only beg her to forgive him."

Orlando looked round nervously.

"You'll fail, I'm afraid. But I hope she'll yield. Mind, not a syllable of what I've told you. She's a wonderful woman. I hope to God you'll bend her, but it's not very likely. There are some things a woman can't forgive. He treated her damned badly, though it's hundreds of years ago now."

"I can but ask her. He's paid a heavy price."

He can't prove that, and you've no right to say so. It's libel. All the same, I see how things look from his point of view. I don't bear him any ill-will. I even make allowances for him. He always snaps at me when we meet, and thinks if I open my mouth it is to insult him; but you've got more sense. As a matter of fact, I don't want to see any man go downhill. You can judge what I think when I tell you I've actually been working for him in a sportsmanlike way. But be dumb about that, if you want to keep my friendship. See my wife, certainly. She'll very likely say you've found a mare's nest, and are talking nonsense; or else she may make it rather unpleasant for you. You must stand the chance of that. All depends on her mood. She'll be very sick if she hears Wolferstan's got in ~~so~~—you'd better go now, before the news of the election reaches her. Keep me out of it, that's all. I can't advise you what the deuce to say to her. But be civil. As a friend I say it. She won't stand any big guns."

"I'm coming on my knees to her," said Ilet; "I'm coming to pray her to be merciful to him, and not ruin him body and soul. She doesn't know or guess a thousandth part of all he's suffered. She——"

"Keep that," he said; "keep that for her, please. It's infernally unpleasant to me to hear it. I'm a humane man, and when you talk of ruin to body and soul, and all that, it's a bit beyond me. Go—and—and—good luck!"

Again he looked round fearfully, as though there might be an eavesdropper behind the hedge, then he shook the rain from his hat, struck his horse and galloped away, while Ilet, deeply impressed by these things, proceeded to the mill.

The mistress of 'Slanning's' kept her waiting twenty minutes. But when she appeared, light broke through the clouds, and Primrose and sunshine entered together.

The miller's wife guessed roughly at Ilet's purpose. She had expected such a visit for many years. Now she doubted not that Wolferstan had lost the election, and that this last straw had nerved his wife to approach and beg for mercy.

"Good morning, Mrs. Wolferstan. You are a stranger indeed. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Ilet surveyed her for a moment without answering. She had grown stouter and rather paler; but she was very handsome still.

Primrose returned the other's straight scrutiny, though her glances were indifferent rather than interested. She sat down and invited Ilet to do so. Then she asked another question.

"Is the result of the election for Portreeve known yet? Your husband, I hear, wanted to take up the work again."

"'Twasn't known when I left the village. Your man will get in most like."

"Mr. Bartlett?"

"Yes."

"He's younger and probably more energetic and up-to-date than Mr. Wolferstan. We get a little lazy after passing forty."

"Not all of us. Not you. When do you mean to give it up and let him and me go our poor way in peace? Haven't you done enough?"

"I'm glad you understand. It saves time."

"We've fought not to understand. Year after year we've tried to believe 'twas chance, not your will, that seemed to wind you into our misfortunes. But, when any bad thing happened to us, we had only to look to find your hand in it. None else could see it; but we could. And even then I tried to get him to believe 'twas a higher Hand than yours that planned our troubles; and sometimes, with his great faith in a loving God, he tried to believe it so; but it always came down, down to you. This

last stroke has cut away the ground under us. We can't pretend to no more blindness. Nobody—not even the man himself—had thought of Roger Bartlett for Portreeve. But 'twas your plan to rise him up against us. And now, if he wins, the last hope's gone for my man, and Christian at heart though he is, I can't tell what he'll do."

"I can tell. He'll go down, as he always does. He'll not try to hit back. That's what has made it so dull for me all these years. Hunted things turn sooner or later. Will he never turn?"

"Yes, they turn—to be torn to pieces—that's all. He shan't turn if I can help it; but I can't help it no more. I've little power over him now. You've marred our days in a way to satisfy even you, if you but knowed it."

"What would he think if he heard that you were here? Or can it be that he sent you?"

"He's nought to do with it. You know that very well."

"I've done what I meant to do."

"Yes. I'm sorry for you. I'm sorry that you were allowed to go so far—for your own sake. 'Tis a pitiful record to take along with you: to hear all folk speak well of you, and yet know of the filthy hole in your heart where you've harboured this."

"You're going to get angry now. Quite right too. You ought to be, poor woman."

"No, I'm not, Primrose Slanning. I'm only here to know if I can shake you, if there's anything a wife can do to change you. What more do you want? I know all about what happened years ago, and the thing he did. I know you wanted my husband for your own, and that you almost got him to promise to marry you."

"It was done. Did he ever tell you that he had kissed me? If your first husband had died in that quarry, or met with his accident five minutes later, Dodd Wolferstan would be my husband now and filling my father's place. On such slight chances hang lives."

"'Tis granted that he did very wrong; but hasn't he paid? If you knowed how he's paid, even you might pity."

"'Pity'! But the sport's growing poor—I confess that. I'm going to stop; and I'll tell you why: it will hurt him more now

if he knows he is not worth hunting—if I ignore him as a thing beneath further notice—than if I go on! I haven't left him much—except you—have I? A laughing-stock—a byword. D'you deny it? Then—what have I left?"

Ilet's eyes flashed her hatred and her voice hissed.

"That's what I know and you do not, you evil wretch! He's got that that even you can't take from him still."

"Not religion—don't fool yourself to think it. The proof of religion is in living. Look at him!"

Ilet remained silent. She saw that Primrose was unchangeable, and that she had guessed the truth.

"His religion's cankered—it's rotting away and you know it," the other continued. "So does everybody know it. That was the last—last word I swore against him. Yet now—because there's nothing else to do that he won't do himself, I'll stop. Don't dream he's ever going to make you a happy wife. It's too late for that."

"He's made me a happy wife, and a proud one, for twelve years."

"You were a deal too good for him. I see now what's kept him going so long. It was hard work, wasn't it? Well, go and comfort yourself—if there's any comfort in it—by thinking that I've done with him. The little good in him has gone past calling back. I'll forget him now. I'll let him go—what's left of him. If you can make him a respectable figure again, you're a cleverer woman than I take you for."

"You're not afraid to say these things?"

"Not I. What is there to fear? Even the balance of justice would be on my side. If I died to-morrow, what's the record in the book? I've done harm to one man and good to fifty. Charity's God's strong point, isn't it? It covers a multitude of sins. I only ask it to cover one! I'm a most religious person—so's my husband."

"You've promised," answered Ilet. "That's all I want from you. A time will come when you'll see your awful wickedness."

They rose together.

"It's been perfectly clear to me for years. But who has no dear little pet sin and hides the key of the cupboard? We all have one lust that we let everything else go for. We're all virtuous south and east, that we may the better be vicious north and

west. You know that well enough. Everybody knows it. Who would believe now, that such a clean-living, charitable, God-fearing creature as I could swear with myself to wreck a man body and soul—and do it? Why, none. And none ever will. They wouldn't believe me myself. They certainly wouldn't believe you. You—his own wife—couldn't believe it at first. But he's free now. You've won. Take back the dregs of a man and do what you can with them to sweeten them. I've sucked him dry. Every possibility of good has gone out of him—torn out by me."

"Your time will come."

"Of course. And I shall make a very nice end here, and a very satisfactory beginning hereafter. Doesn't justice demand it? How many women will have done more good according to their power than I?"

They had now reached the front door, and Ilet, hastening through it, departed; whilst Primrose stood still and watched her. Then Mrs. Slanning descended the steps and walked in her garden. She moved presently beside the mill. The dam was down and the wheel motionless. The blossoms of iris and meadow-sweet were dead and gone; the water moved darkly, sun-shot with amber light; and on its face blood-red cherry leaves were floating. The stream made a hiss and splash where it spouted from a hole in the dam. A robin sat on the mill-wheel and sang. The wind puffed at his little feathers, spun the falling leaves, ruffled the leat with sudden multitudinous wavelets, and scattered the red and gold of orchards upon the sodden grasses. The air was sweet with the savour of all this fruit, while the sun shone watery and the clouds flew fast.

CHAPTER XVII

‘IN AT THE DEATH’

DICKY BARKELL obeyed Slanning and kept his secret very strictly. Therefore none knew that the miller had changed his mind and was favouring Dodd upon the morning of the election. Thus it happened that in certain critical moments now upon him, Wolferstan acted under misapprehension.

After Slanning passed Ilet, he went on into Bridgetstowe, and Dodd had just left his house to go in the same direction, when he saw Orlando ride by.

The horseman observed him and waved his crop, but Wolferstan resented the salute and took no notice of it.

Slanning disappeared and Dodd went slowly along the same road. Roger Bartlett's home stood not far distant beside the highway, and presently he passed it. But nobody was stirring there. Wolferstan hesitated at the door, then tramped forward. The road was empty. He heard the clock at Bridgetstowe strike twelve. The sound turned his mind for a moment to the church, and, from the church, to the monuments within it. Upon the stress and ~~for~~ fear of this hour the cenotaph of Lady Honor Wolferstan inaptly thrust itself. He found himself repeating aimlessly, again and again, the opening rhyme of the memorial :—

“ Eight fruitful branches still are springing sound,
Though here the root lies dead within the ground.”

No fruitful branches would spring from him!

The noise of voices far off reached his ear. There was shouting and cheering, and the wind brought the sound faintly to him. He knew that the result of the election had been declared and the figures announced. For a moment he stopped ; then he went on again. The distant acclamations fitted into the verse that had thus strangely intruded upon his thoughts :—

"Eight fruitful branches——"

He turned his back on Bridgetstowe and began to walk home again. He supposed that Ilet had gone to the village and would presently bring the tidings of success or failure. He wore his broadcloth and now found himself regretting that he had been at the trouble of putting it on. The distant noise ceased. The sun shone out suddenly. Then in the stillness, there came quick feet running. They were too light for a man, and he thought it must be Ilet. But turning, he saw a boy, and knew that it was Roger Bartlett's eldest son. Bartlett had four children—was he to have everything?

Did the boy run now to tell his father of success? It appeared so, for the youngster slowed his pace and indicated concern at sight of Dodd.

"Hullo, Samuel! You'm from Bridgetstowe—eh? And going hot-foot. You wouldn't be running so fast if your news was bad. Is your father Portreeve?"

"Yes, please, sir:—excuse me for telling you, Mr. Wolferstan. I comed as near the people as I could. Then, just after twelve, there was shouting and I heard faither's name named by Mr. Mudford in the crowd. So I thinks, 'Tis faither must have got it'—if you'll excuse me."

The rhyme ran on in Wolferstan's head, and he stared at this boy and spoke.

"'Eight fruitful branches still are springing sound'," he said. Then he broke off and addressed Samuel. "Run along—run, can't 'e? Get out of my sight anyhow."

The boy fled. The sky grew darker and the rain brushed down over the hedges.

Wolferstan stood still for a moment, then he continued his walk homeward. As he reached his gate a galloping horse overtook him, and he saw Orlando Slanning. Passion got hold upon him and he fought hard with it. Again Slanning raised his stock and shouted. For a moment Dodd turned to enter his house. Then he saw his spade beside a piece of unfinished work and stopped. He took off his coat slowly and hung it on an apple tree. Then he picked up the spade and thrust it into the earth. He had turned a sod when Slanning dismounted. A moment later the miller hitched his horse to the fence and swaggered up the path-way, grinning cheerfully. This triumph paraded to his face

infuriated the other. He turned with a flaming countenance, and his voice, escaping control, ran up and cracked.

"Out of this, you devil! or I'll break your neck! You'd dare to come inside my——"

Slanning appreciated danger, but perceived that it rested on the other's ignorance. Yet for a moment he dallied with the truth, that its force might come with a grander stroke. Still he grinned and ignored Wolferstan's obvious fury.

"Hold on! Don't roar like a bull of Bashan. I thought you'd like to know that Roger Bartlett—hasn't——"

He stopped and leapt back for his life; but he was too late. Wolferstan's answer came in a blow, delivered with both hands and a heavy spade held edgewise. Slanning's uplifted arm broke the stroke and itself was broken, but force enough remained to send the iron through his hard hat and on to his skull. He screamed, flung up his arms, and fell.

The horse at the gate, frightened by the noise, dragged at its rein and kicked. From the house Henny Pierce and her granddaughter came running.

"There he is!" cried Wolferstan. "He's brought himself to that, and me to this."

There was a shout at the gate and Johnny Ball, his brother, and half a dozen other men appeared. They were hot and breathless with haste. They saw Wolferstan, but not the man at his feet, for Slanning lay half hidden by cabbages.

"Has 'e told 'e—Mr. Slanning?" shouted Tommy Ball. "He galloped along with all his might to bring the news."

"You'm Portreeve, you'm Portreeve; an' if you'll wet our whistles, we'll shout it the louder," cried a Bridgetstowe man.

The boy Samuel had erred. Misled by the sound of his father's name before the announcement of the figures, he had rushed off too soon. Wolferstan proved the winner, with forty-five votes more than his neighbour out of a total poll of one hundred and seventy-three.

"And I do believe as Mr. Slanning will be glad you've got it, Dodd. Did he tell 'e?"

"Come in—come in all. Here he is! 'Tis a lesson, souls, to say what you mean and not play the fool with a desperate man. He came grinning here, just after I'd heard as t'other was in. He named t'other hissself, and, afore he'd got further—look at

him—he'll cackle no more—eh? Dead—eh? Turn him over, Tom."

The horrified men crowded round Orlando and, when they spoke again, Wolferstan had disappeared.

Ball ran to the gate and reported that he was hastening along the road.

"He's off to 'Slanning's'," said Henny Pierce. "He'll make a clean job of it. Oh, my God, can't nobody stop him?"

"This here's our business," answered Johnny Ball. "Let the Lord look after yonder man. We'm all His tools. 'Tis for us to take this poor gentleman to the cottage hospital so quick as we are able. Doctor Hext was over this morning, and if one amongst us runs back to Bridgetstowe, we may catch him at his room afore he's off."

"I'll go," said Thomas Ball; "and I'll make so bold as to ride on the poor gentleman's hoss, so as I'll get back the quicker. There's no harm in it—eh, John?"

"'Tis quite allowable and to be pardoned, seeing he'm at death's door—or through it," answered his brother. "Gallop, Tom; and if Mr. Hext be gone, just go after him. Nobody but a doctor can say if he's alive or dead."

Tommy Ball soon trotted off, and lost all sense of trouble in the immense pleasure of being, for the first and last time in his life, on a valuable horse.

The others drew a light cart from a shed, lifted Slanning into it and, since no steed was to be found, pulled it along the road to Bridgetstowe themselves. Under the unconscious sufferer's head were pillows placed there by Henny Pierce.

Meantime Wolferstan hastened towards 'Slanning's'. All that was in his mind he could not have told. Barriers were down and floodgates up. The hurricane swept his soul. One purpose alone held fast: to see Primrose Slanning and tell her that he had killed her husband. Something near insanity lighted his face; and when Ilet, moving homeward, was confronted with this human storm, she indeed thought that her husband was mad. She doubted not that he had lost the election, and felt thankful that to her he had come in his tribulation.

"Why, Dodd—" she began; then he cut her short.

"You can't stop me now—none can't. Stand out of the way. It's all over. It's all up with him."

"Dodd—Dodd—stop! You shan't go on. What do you mean?"

"I'm Portreeve—Portreeve of Bridgetstowe! They put me in. But 'twas too late. Get off, Ilet! Don't hang on my arm. I'm going to tell her."

"What have you done?"

"Done for him—and would again. I've gazed on his damned smug face too often. Now he'll go down into the pit. Nobody shall tell her but me. And none after him—for there's no children."

"He was your friend—oh, Dodd, he meant well to you. I saw him and he hoped you'd get in."

"None after him—a sterile man. God don't want no more of his breed—nor yet of hers. 'Eight fruitful branches——' He 'meant me well'! You to talk that foolishness?"

"Come back!—come back with me. You're not yourself, dear Dodd."

"Yes, I am—we all are that. I've heard Dicky tell as we can't escape ourselves. This was waiting for me all these years. I wish I'd given heed to Dicky more and my God less. He's thrown me over. Here I stand, bloody to the eyes, and His back be turned upon me. Not a thought for me—an' never had—never had. Blind and deaf as the stone gods of the heathen men."

"Don't—don't say these awful things. 'Tis a dream."

"If 'tis a dream, I won't wake yet. He meant well under his noise and bluster and bitter speeches. Did he so? Then what about her—that she-devil to the mill? Did she mean well too? 'Tis her work—not mine—all hers. Then she shall get her payment. No more husbands for her—not another. She might bring children by another man—breed devils—as if there weren't enough. Let go!"

"Dodd—never! While I can hold you, I will."

"Do you want me to put you out o' the way too? Face it—he's gone—I've killed him—cut his empty fool's head open. And is she going to be left? No!—'twas meant for me to end her, and her to end me. That was my God's merry game! He's not blind nor deaf, though I said He was. . . . He's heard all . . . seen all . . . laughed at all. Her time will come first, and mine after."

She clung to him and raised a loud cry for help. They were now a quarter of a mile from 'Slanning's', and one heard that cry and started and strained her ears.

Primrose in her garden listened, but the sound was not repeated; for Wolferstan—raddened by it and now beyond self-control—flung Ilet off heavily, then started again towards the mill.

His wife, however, was but little hurt and quickly returned to him. She had wounded her face in falling.

"Listen, for all the past, Dodd—listen to me!—Oh, God, make him listen—You that he's obeyed and worshipped! I—I ask you, Dodd—you that led me to God, now let me bring you back—back to Him afore the time's past "

"The time be past. I've killed her husband, yet not I, but her. 'Tis her work. Ban't a murderess to be punished? All the angels in heaven won't keep me off that woman now. . . . I'm God's servant yet—so much as any man. . . . I be here to do the dirty work of my God, and all hell won't save her. These hands on her throat—the last and best job as ever they'll do. I'll not spoil the work. I'll do it same as I've done all things—with my might. There's the place, and there's the woman! . . . Her Maker's brought her! "

A hundred yards in front of them stood the gate of the mill, and behind it was Primrose Slanning. She still listened for a repetition of the distant cry.

Now Wolferstan began to run very swiftly and Ilet was distanced. For a moment Primrose watched with growing excitement. Then the man's gestures and terrific face spoke of instant peril. She stepped back a pace instinctively. Her lips tightened, but she did not lose her nerve. He appeared to be out of his mind, and clearly meant her harm. She heard him roar; then Ilet's voice travelled to her quicker than the approaching man.

"Run, for God's sake! He'll kill you if he catches you! "

Primrose had once escaped by a hair's breadth from a bad-tempered bull on her father's farm. She remembered the incident now. Fifty yards separated her from the mill door, and it was shut but not locked. She calculated that she would have time to reach it and ascend the step within. Once aloft amid the machinery, she might escape him. There was no other hope. But the man came very fast and had nearly reached the gate when she began to run. She dropped her hat, kept her eyes on

the mill door and made the best speed possible towards it. Before her towered the huge black wheel against the wall of the mill; the door was in an immediate line with her. She heard Wolferstan vault the gate. He was over in an instant, and she had no time to latch the door again after passing through, for he reached it a moment after her and forced it open.

Now she was half way up the stairs, while he stood at the bottom. He leapt up and every moment she expected to feel his hand on her dress and find herself dragged backward. Only by exercise of will and utmost dexterity of body did she escape. Once his hand actually reached her skirt, but she tore it free; the abortive effort, making him miss a stair, threw him back a pace; and the slip saved her.

At the top, in a great chamber dusted with white flour, yet dark by reason of the little light, she crossed a plank that spanned a chasm; she crossed and then dislodged the plank just as his foot was on it.

Now for a moment she breathed again. The gap was too great for him to leap, and only by climbing to the rafters or trusting himself in the machinery, could Wolferstan now reach her. She panted furiously and held her left hand hard to her heart; but her right hand rose to a lever in the wall, and her steady eyes were not off him for a moment.

He stood and glared and panted; then he began to creep across to her.

"You're done for," he said. "You're a murderess, and your cup's full. Your husband's dead. I've killed him and I'm sent to finish you."

He had left the firm flooring and was working his way across movable machinery.

"Go back!" she cried, "or I'll start the mill!"

His only answer was to come the quicker.

She saw that her own safety must involve his destruction, and did not hesitate. He was half way across now and would have reached her in a few moments. Therefore she pulled the lever swiftly, opened the sluice and set moving the mighty wheel without. Then she turned a handle and the mill began to work. A strange life suddenly made itself manifest amid the inert, huge wheels and arms of wood and iron. A hum and rumble, as of some monster awaking, fell upon the ear. The place trembled;

the sleeping dust rose. Wolferstan's foothold slid away from beneath him, and he was borne downward. He stretched up his arms to clutch other bars, and they held him up for a few moments. Then a descending beam struck his shoulder and swept him away. He fell and was caught and pinned through one awful second. Then the mass that held him rose again and he dropped twenty feet into the darkness. So Primrose had seen a spider drop from a wall when tapped with a shoe.

A single cry broke through the throb and thunder; but it was Wolferstan's wife who uttered it. She stood at the top of the stairs in time to see her husband destroyed.

Primrose stopped the mill.

CHAPTER XVIII

A GOOD YEAR'S WORK

ABNER BARKELL and his ancient friend Ned Perryman walked together from worship on a day in early January. They had not met since Christmas, and now, in a mood chastened by the advent of another year, they discussed events and reviewed the past.

A dry, bright day reigned over the naked earth; easterly, clean-cut and stern of aspect, the changeless hills rose into a pale blue sky.

"A good year's work for the nation—except here and there," said Mr. Perryman. "I'm keeping wonderful well for up four-score, an' you'm on your pins again."

"Though it have been a cruel downfall to me to give up malt liquor."

"No doubt; but doctor knows best. You'll get used to spirits, though 'tis granted they ban't so holding or so full in the mouth. Still, a good year, if you take a large view."

Abner nodded.

"I must grant it in reason," he said. "The bridge had two coats and the weather kept fine all the time. Taking the large view, as you say, Ned—a very favourable year. The hay was good, the corn was good, and the roots middling."

"And we've finished fighting the foreigners."

"And my sea-going sons have been home; and I've seen 'em both once more; and one's raised to a petty officer. Then your grand-darter's married that young, earnest man, Johnny Ball, who's took to preaching on Sundays. But she can preach to him week-days, so 'twill be all one."

"Not but what there's been trouble here an' there."

"A plenty without a doubt. An' among friends too. There was the end of Dodd Wolferstan—cut off like a mad dog, poor

soul ! Though what set his wits roaming the very day they made Portreeve of him, only God knows."

"All the same, a good few others thought they knowed."

"'Twas a very far-reaching tragedy. Dang my old wig, but I never heard the like."

"How be Mr. Slanning now?"

"He's one of the Lord's chosen evermore—won't never get well again. The wits are out of him. Some said he hadn't much to lose; but, for my part, I thought him a very sensible, useful man after marriage. However, the intellects be gone for good. He rides a hobby-horse like a boy, an' thinks he be out fox-hunting."

"God's a marvel!"

"True for you, Ned. And the man's wife worse than a widow; but she've taken it in a very high Christian spirit. A masterpiece for good works, they tell me." Father and husband both gone in a year."

"The wrong people always die—to say it in a prayerful spirit, Barkell."

"Not all—so long as you an' me keep trotting."

"You will have your bit of fun, I see. And I hear Ilet have wrote out the words for the stonemason with her own hands. The man was up over forty when he died. And he'm to be called Portreeve of Bridgetstowe upon his stone. So he was, and so he was on the day of his death, so 'twill be solemn truth and quite in order to put it like that for after generations. 'Twill lift his memory a thought higher than the common dust where his parents lie."

"And she's settled with Mrs. Pierce?"

"She have. She might marry again and no harm done; but I reckon she've had her dose of husbands, and won't take another. Old Henny gets help from Mrs. Slanning, but she's secret as the grave about it and very cunning, because she thinks that Ilet would refuse if she got wind."

"Well, he was a good sort of man, and a kind one," said Ned. "I can't say I knew him well, but I always stuck up for him, when folk said harsh words against him."

"He was a very good sort of man in many ways," admitted Abner. "And light-hearted in his youth. He did a plenty proper deeds in his prosperous days, for sheer joy and gladness—like the bird sings."

"He was a great worker among the boys, and put many a young youth on the right road."

"He had a hope to raise his head in the land, but things fell contrary. If a man's temper goes, 'tis all over."

"It wrecked him; and yet us must think of charity and say 'twas the breakdown of his mind that came between him and success. Well, here's your way—here's mine. I wish you a very happy New Year, and as many more of 'em as the Almighty wills."

"An' same to you, Ned."

"To your son Richard, likewise. What a piece he is! I met him t'other day, wi' his face down, pawking along as if time was eternity—staring at the river, he was."

"He mourned over Wolferstan's end a good deal more than you'd have guessed. Tried to hide it, too. I hoped 'twould have made a Christian of him, but it didn't."

"I like your boy's sweet fooling better than his bitter. He gived Jane a golden sovereign when she was married. 'Twas a very gentlemanlike thing to do, and I shan't forget it—more won't Johnny Ball. In fact, Johnny says he'll convert the man yet—the Lord helping."

"'Tis a curious breakdown of mind. The only one of my family as I can ever remember as was touched."

"He've got any amount of patience wi' man, but none wi' God, seemingly."

"'Tis wonderful the patience God have got with him, Ned."

Old Perryman, from the snowy summit of eighty years, smiled hopefully.

"An' wi' us all, wi' us all, neighbour."

CONTENTS

	PAGE	
Little Blue Books,	29	Little Blue Books,
Little Books on Art,	30	Little Books on Art,
Little Galleries,	30	Little Galleries,
Little Guides,	30	Little Guides,
Little Library,	31	Little Library,
Miniature Library,	31	Miniature Library,
Oxford Monographs,	31	Oxford Monographs,
School Examination Series,	31	School Examination Series,
Social Questions of Today,	32	Social Questions of Today,
Textbooks of Science,	32	Textbooks of Science,
Textbooks of Technology,	32	Textbooks of Technology,
Handbooks of Theology,	33	Handbooks of Theology,
Westminster Commentaries,	33	Westminster Commentaries,
Wigston,	34	Wigston,
The Strand Novels,	34	The Strand Novels,
Books for Boys and Girls,	35	Books for Boys and Girls,
Novels of Alexandre Dumas,	35	Novels of Alexandre Dumas,
Wentworth's Mystery Books,	35	Wentworth's Mystery Books,

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